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A COOL HEAD; or, ORSON OXX IN PERIL.

A TALE OF THE FIRE-BUGS.

BY ISAAC HAWKS, Ex-Detective.



THEREUPON THE MAN OF IRON PROCEEDED TO "CLEAN OUT" THE ESTABLISHMENT TO WHICH HE REFERRED.

A Cool Head;

OR,

ORSON OXX IN PERIL.

A TALE OF THE FIRE-BUGS.

BY ISAAC HAWKS, EX-DETECTIVE,
AUTHOR OF "ORSON OXX, THE MAN OF IRON,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

ORSON OXX FINDS HIMSELF IN GREAT PERIL.

"KILL HIM! LYNCH HIM! WE'VE GOT HIM DEAD TO RIGHTS!"

These were some of the fearful cries uttered by an infuriated mob, who were as clamorous for the life of a single man, caught in their toils, as though they were so many famishing tigers in the jungles of Hindostan.

That single person was Orson Oxx, the wonderful detective.

He was in the most imminent peril of his life, and the extraordinary manner in which he thus became endangered may be briefly told.

He landed in the small town of Ardville, quite early in the autumn evening, with not the slightest thought of personal risk.

He had come in response to a message from Algol Langdon, the nabob of the place.

He stepped from the train in the gloom of a damp evening in November, with several other passengers, and walked along the low platform, after the manner of one who was familiar with the place.

He had learned by inquiry that there were two hotels in Ardville. One was near the station and the other was at the extremity of the village.

The detective was not in disguise, though he always carried with him the facilities for making the lightning changes which his profession so often rendered necessary.

He was neatly dressed in a business suit, and one glance at the magnificent youth, would have told the most ordinary spectator that he possessed marvelous strength and activity.

Such was the fact, and, withal, he was without a superior in the "manly art of self-defense."

He was a model of athletic grace, skill and self-poise.

No living pugilist could have "knocked him out" in four or forty rounds.

More than likely the case would have been reversed.

As Orson Oxx stepped down from the long platform, and, walking a short distance up the street, turned to the right, he recalled the descriptions and directions received from a young farmer, whom he questioned in the cars.

There was the small flat village store on the left, then came the post-office, a wheelwright shop and several dwellings, all shown by the oil lamps burning at short distances apart on both sides of the street.

"The Delaware House is two or three hundred yards to the right," he said to himself, as he started off at an easy pace in that direction.

There were few people on the street, for the night was raw and blustery, and it was more comfortable within doors than on the outside.

Oxx was a detective of great skill and shrewdness, and it was rarely he was outwitted in his contest with criminals.

He always had his senses about him, and yet he overlooked one important fact when he left the railroad station.

He was "piped" or shadowed by a man of slight figure and catlike movement.

This stranger walked as silently as if he wore rubber shoes, and the careless glance which Orson Oxx threw behind him, when he turned the corner, failed to reveal his shadowy pursuer.

The detective had passed about two-thirds the length of the village when his quick vision detected a suspicious movement on the other side of the street.

Instinctively he darted across the dimly lit space to ascertain what it meant.

He had scarcely turned, when a man started on a run up the street in the direction which the detective was following.

It was safe to conclude that no man would run, under such circumstances, unless he had been doing something wrong.

Orson dashed after him, calling upon him to halt.

The fugitive ran very fast, but, under other circumstances, Orson Oxx would have overtaken him without difficulty.

As it was, he was handicapped by the darkness and his unfamiliarity with the place.

Bounding forward with great speed, there was no saying where he would land or with what object he would come in collision.

As it was, however, he kept close on the heels of the fugitive, until he shot by the Delaware House and vanished in the darkness.

Oxx caught a glimpse of him as he sped under the lamp, and he noticed that he had the least possible limp in his gait.

In the gloom beyond it was useless to attempt

to follow the scoundrel and the pursuer turned about.

"I suppose he was some amateur burglar—" At that moment the startling cry rung upon the night air:

"Fire! fire! fire!"

Looking down-street, the detective caught the glare of flames and saw people flocking from all directions.

"That's about the spot where I caught sight of that lame fellow," thought Orson; "if I had known he was a fire-bug I would have given him the contents of my revolver."

The detective moved in the direction of the conflagration, but before he reached it, saw that it was under control.

Ardville, for a place of its size, was well furnished with facilities for extinguishing fires.

A small house had broken out in flames, but they were discovered, and vigorous and prompt measures subdued the "fire-fiend" before it could make much headway.

As there was nothing to be done, Orson turned about and made his way to the Delaware House where he registered under the name of George Gordon.

He had just laid down his pen and was exchanging a few words with the landlord, when a fierce crowd swarmed into the bar-room and the fearful cry was heard:

"Kill him! lynch him! We've got him dead to rights!"

And, we repeat, Orson Oxx was in the most imminent peril of his life.

CHAPTER II.

A FRIEND IN NEED IS A FRIEND INDEED.

ORSON did not suspect his danger until it was too late to extricate himself. It was as if the multitude had been gathering force like a mountain torrent, until the door was burst inward and they poured into the room, closing in on every side. The detective walked forward to meet them, but was stopped in the middle of the room, where the circle formed half a dozen deep.

Had the athlete been given a moment's warning, he would not have been caught in this trap; but he certainly was warranted in feeling he was not in the slightest danger, when visiting this country town, which he had never seen before. Had these bowling furies been unarmed, he could have fought his way out; but there were bludgeons, guns and pistols in sight, and they were held by men eager to use them.

The Man of Iron knew that only a slight pretext was required. The instant he attempted to get away, a fusillade would be opened which would be certain to riddle him with bullets. It was equally useless to draw his own weapon, for that would only precipitate his death.

For one instant he was paralyzed, while the mob crowded closer about him, and other fearful cries were added to those which first saluted him.

"Fetch him out! We've got a rope! we'll make short work with the fire-bug!"

It was the last words which gave the imperiled detective the clew to the cause of this whirlwind of excitement.

He had been shadowed by a village detective, who was stationed at the depot to watch suspicious characters, and was seen running from the direction of the fire.

Everything indicated that he was the incendiary.

He recalled too that the young farmer with whom he held the conversation in the train, told him that there were a gang of fire-bugs in Ardville.

There had been six or eight conflagrations within the past two months, and one of them was attended by loss of life, while all had been more or less serious.

The whole village was in a state of exasperation difficult to imagine. All Ardville had become a Vigilance Committee, and the people were thirsting to lay hands on the fire-bugs that they might wreak their vengeance upon the cowardly wretches. They were sure they had caught one of the desperate scoundrels at last; hence their wild, fierce desire to lynch him.

Orson Oxx swayed hither and thither with the mob and now raised his hand and shouted for them to listen to him.

After several minutes, something like quiet was restored though the clamor continued on the outside.

"Friends," he called out in a voice as clear as a bugle, "I reached this village, but a short time ago. This is the first time I was ever in Ardville—"

"That's too thin; that won't do," broke in several.

"When I was coming to this hotel, I caught sight of a man who started the fire down the street; I gave chase, but he eluded me in the darkness. Just as I returned, I find you suspect me of committing the crime for which I would gladly assist to punish him. I have been told that you have suffered much from fires—"

"Yes, and you know an infernal sight more about it than any one else," broke in a bare-headed man in his shirt sleeves, who held a frightful-looking bludgeon in his grasp and

was continually struggling for a chance to bring it down on the skull of the accused, without endangering his friends.

"That sort of thing won't wash!"

"Too thin ag'in!"

"You're the one we've been looking for!"

"We've had the rope and tree ready for a month!"

"I followed him from the depot and seen him start the fire!"

"You're the one to begin our new graveyard with!"

These are but specimens of the hoarse cries which come from many American mobs, when their feelings are wrought to a high pitch.

If worst came to the worst, Orson Oxx meant to draw his revolver, fire right and left and then make one of his herculean struggles to reach and force his way through the door, but he would be certain to receive desperate if not fatal wounds in the effort.

He saw that his speech had produced no impression in his favor, and he shouted again:

"Every man is entitled to a show, isn't he?"

Some answered "yes," to this appeal, but the majority affirmed that a fire-bug was an exception.

"It is best to let a hundred guilty escape than to punish an innocent man."

"But you ain't innocent—not much!"

"Give me an opportunity and I will establish my innocence to the satisfaction of any of your number."

The mob were losing all patience; they had been deprived of their prey too long.

The crisis was at hand and a terrible death-struggle was on the very eve of opening, when a man sprung upon the bar and shouted in a voice which commanded instant attention:

"Friends! listen one moment!"

Instantly all faces were turned toward him and silence to a remarkable degree fell upon the furious mob.

It was evident that the new claimant to attention possessed the confidence of the villagers. He was a young man of handsome appearance, and his eye flashed with passion.

"You all know me," said he; "I am Brayton Russell and I was born in Ardville; the home of my childhood was burned down by these fire-bugs within a month past and my own mother perished in the flames. I was the first to suggest a Vigilance Committee, and I am ready to help violate law by lynching the first incendiary on which we can lay hands."

Here the speaker's voice was drowned by thunderous cheers and it was a minute or two before he could proceed.

"But we must be certain we have the guilty party before we visit him with punishment. Neither you nor I ever could forgive ourselves if we hung a man who it was afterward proved was innocent. There is doubt in this case; this man may be guilty or he may be innocent; let us make certain!"

CHAPTER III.

ORSON OXX CONCLUDES TO DO SOMETHING FOR HIMSELF.

THE proposition of Brayton Russell took away the breath of the mob for the moment. They would not have given it a second's thought coming from any one else.

He clinched his proposition by suggesting that the accused be taken to an adjoining room, where, in the presence of three who were to be designated by the crowd, he should be subjected to a rigid cross-examination. If he failed to give a satisfactory account of himself, he was to be turned over to the mob. If there was doubt, he was to be held until his guilt should be established or disproved.

The people agreed to this and named Brayton Russell, Shadrach Yelland and "Sam Six-Eye," as the committee. Shadrach was a Justice of the Peace, a fiery enemy of all incendiaries and an uncompromising advocate of violating the law by lynching the fire-bugs the moment hands could be laid on them. "Sam Six-Eye" was an ex-sheriff, who sometimes wore double spectacles of a green color, from which fact he derived his curious name. He was as sanguinary as the most violent of the crowd. Both he and Yelland held a loaded pistol in hand, and they would have discharged them long before could they have gained the chance.

"Russell won't shut up their eyes," was the comment, as the three men escorted the prisoner into the adjoining room.

Mr. Twiggbottom, who loudly claimed to be an important witness, was admitted that his testimony might be heard.

Little Peter Twiggbottom, the principal shoemaker of Ardville, had been so fired by reading the exploits of detectives, that he determined to attempt the part of one himself. For a week past he had hung about the railroad station on the watch for "suspicious characters." He had been there in his rubber shoes, when he saw the prisoner step off, and was at once impressed with his highly suspicious appearance, so followed him as slyly as a cat, and saw him fire the building!

He grappled the unprincipled monster by the throat and threw him to the ground with great

violence; but the prisoner twisted loose and started to run.

Then it was that Peter's fellow-citizens took a hand in the game.

Such was the shoemaker-detective's story.

It would have been final and conclusive against the prisoner but for the embellishment in his account of how he grappled and threw the Herculean prisoner to the ground.

The other three knew that Peter Twiggensbottom was an absolute and unadulterated coward. Despite the gravity of the situation, Brayton Russell broke into a laugh when the son of Crispin narrated how he had thrown the villain to the earth.

"That will do, Peter," said he, kindly; "we will now permit you to retire; when we need you we will telegraph for you."

"But I insist—"

Young Russell had drawn the door part way open, and he now pushed the protesting shoemaker through it.

Then it was quickly barred, and he turned to the serious business before them.

Orson Oxx formed a strong liking for this young man at once. He had suffered the most severely from the cruelty of the incendiaries, and yet he was the only one who insisted on anything like fair play, if it be permitted that there ever is any element of fair play in lynching a poor wretch.

The other two were brutal, stupid and determined to hang the man before them, leaving the question of guilt or innocence to be established afterward.

Orson made a straightforward statement of himself, but concealing his real business in visiting Ardville, for professional duty demanded that no one should know he had come to this out-of-the-way village in answer to a summons from Algol Langdon. Such an admission might defeat the very purpose which had to do with his coming.

His refusal to make this known told strongly against him.

Brayton Russell was in favor of allowing the gentleman to depart, for he was impressed with the truthfulness of every statement, though he begged the prisoner to strain a point and make known how it was he came to be in Ardville on the night of the attempted fire.

Orson Oxx expressed his regrets, but said he was compelled to decline answering the question.

"That settles it," said Yelland; "there's only one business which could bring him hither, and that's fire bugism."

"Certainly; he's guilty," assented Sam Six-Eye, with an angry oath. "We'll pass him over to the people—"

"I rather think you won't."

It was Orson Oxx who made this remark, and, as he did so, he placed his back against the door and raised his fists in front of him.

The infuriated Sam Six-Eye reached for his pistol, but before he could draw it Orson Oxx drove in one of his cannon-shot blows which sent him across the room as if propelled by a catapult.

The astounded Shadrach Yelland was similarly treated before he could produce his weapon, and he went crashing over the table and utterly wrecked a chair ere he came to a stop.

Brayton Russell had no pistol, but he was a fine athlete, and he instantly placed himself in a position of defense.

"Nothing in the world would induce me to attack you," said Orson Oxx, looking admiringly toward him, "for you are a born gentleman; you have been the means of saving me from violence at the hands of the mob, and I shall not forget it. I never dreamed of setting fire to a building, and would be glad to help you find the guilty one."

The impatient crowd were clamoring at the door, and would soon be inside. It would be death to wait longer.

Orson walked to the window and raised it. It was too high for the rioters to gather around and look in but not too high for his purpose; so raising the sash lightly, he dropped to the ground and vanished in the night.

CHAPTER IV.

"AN ANGEL OF LIGHT."

FIFTEEN minutes after the exciting events just recorded, Orson Oxx was walking quietly through the main street on his way to the handsome residence of Algol Langdon, at whose summons the detective had come from the Metropolis to the village of Ardville.

He had made some changes in his personal appearance during his hurried withdrawal from the Delaware House, which prevented any of the people whom he encountered recognizing him.

He heard angry and excited discussions, and, brave as he was, he could not repress a shudder when he reflected on what his fate would have been, but for the interference of Brayton Russell.

"He was the only one in the mob who retained anything like his presence of mind," muttered the detective. "He has a fine, intellectual face and a character which compelled respect even from those ravening wolves—"

Orson Oxx paused, for just then he came upon a scene which enchained him.

He had passed the Delaware House, and was on the outskirts of the village, when he paused opposite a small stone house, within which a bright light was shining.

The curtain was not drawn, so that he gained a full view of the interior of the small apartment. It was the dwelling-place of poverty and illness.

An old lady, wan, feeble and pale, sat propped in a chair, looking as if actually dead. On a stool at her feet sat a young woman of extraordinary beauty, who was reading to her from a book. She was manifestly doing what she could to lighten the weary hours of one who was unable to help herself.

The tray, sitting on a small stand at the side of the room, and a cup and saucer, showed that the wondrously fair visitor had not neglected the wants of the body while ministering to those of the mind.

The figure of the young lady was of matchless contour. Her back was toward the spectator, who thus noted the shapely shoulders and willowy waist, but she frequently turned and looked up into the wan countenance of the aged invalid.

This brought her enchanting profile against the ruddy flame on the hearth, with all the wealth of yellow hair, which looked liquid gold in the glow of the firelight.

"The angel of the sick room," muttered Orson Oxx, with a thrill of admiration; "she is rich and kind and charitable; she has sent provisions and fuel and food; she visits the old lady to soothe and comfort her last hours. Ah, if there were more such, this world would not be so wretched."

It was easy to read the touching picture, for it told its own story.

Orson Oxx, by his profession, was brought in contact with innumerable phases of crime, and, young as he was, he was often saddened by the discovery of many errors and sins, where the world looked only for virtue and integrity.

The sight before him was like an oasis in the parched desert, and he stood several minutes forgetful of the important business which had brought him thither.

Suddenly the young lady seemed to awake to the fact that the curtain was not drawn. She sprung from the stool, and stepping hastily to the window, shut out from the view of the world that which could not fail to make it better.

As she came forward and reached up her hand, the act revealed more of her ravishing face and figure.

Orson Oxx was sure he had never looked on anything more enchanting in all his life.

"It is cruel," he muttered with a sigh, "to deprive me of the most beautiful picture on which I ever gazed."

At that moment, the gate which opened into the tiny yard in front of the building was drawn back, and a man walked briskly over the brief space, and knocked on the door.

"You are to be envied," thought the detective, with a grim smile, as he instinctively read the meaning of what he saw.

The door was opened by the young lady who had entranced the spectator, and the flood of light thrown over her figure revealed the handsome countenance of the gentleman, when he stooped over and touched his lips to the velvety cheek.

Orson Oxx saw the face of the caller, and recognized him.

It was Brayton Russell, the young man who had befriended him, when in such imminent peril a short while before!

"If there is any one in this wide world who deserves such a priceless jewel it is *you*," was the conclusion of the detective, who shoved his hands down in his pockets and walked on.

It was a dark night, but he could see enough of the road to guide him to the place, about which he had made minute inquiries.

A short distance beyond Ardville he turned into an avenue, the gate of which stood open. It was lined on both sides with a row of stately poplars, which diffused a cool twilight during the sultry midsummer.

"A delightful old homestead," mused Orson Oxx, walking steadily forward, and looking keenly to the right and left; "it may have been built before the Revolution. I suppose the fellow must expect me, though I did not notify him when I would be here."

A light was shining from the lower floor, but it was dim, showing that it came through a curtain, which would shut out any inquisitive eyes.

Orson Oxx walked deliberately forward, stepped upon a high, covered porch, and sounded a large brass knocker. His summons was answered by a negro of large frame, who opened the door only a few inches, and demanded his business.

"Tell Mr. Langdon that Mr. Oxx, from New York, wishes to see him."

This message secured almost immediate admission for the detective. A minute later he found himself in the presence of his patron, who was the cause of his making this journey from New York.

CHAPTER V.

ALGOL, THE WINKING DEMON.

ORSON OXX sat opposite one of the most extraordinary men on whom he had ever looked. He was tall, thin, exceedingly muscular and with an eye as keen as that of a serpent when charming its prey.

We say an eye, because he had only one good eye.

His face was covered by a beard of intense blackness which extended clear to his cheekbones. The hair of his head was equally black and was long and bushy.

His right eye was an artificial one, made of glass and intended to mate the other; but, either nature or art had failed to do its whole duty, and the covering of the eyeball had shrunk away from it, so that the orb itself was double the size of the natural one—that is, it showed fully twice as much.

It is easy to fancy the dreadful, staring appearance which the artificial organ assumed.

Mr. Langdon seemed proud of his hideous looks in this respect, for he added to them by allowing a lock of his jetty hair to hang down from his forehead over the false eye.

This never concealed it from view, for the hair always parted enough to show it, but it looked like the eye of some monster glaring through a bush upon you.

It was said that when Mr. Langdon was under great excitement, he winked this false eye, but at other times, it remained as fixed and overpowering as the headlight of a locomotive.

The owner was dressed in deep black and his coat was buttoned close under his chin. He was seated in his library, with his long, slender legs extended under his table, and he held a quill pen in hand, as though he was writing, just before he looked up, greeted his visitor and motioned him to a seat.

He seemed to be over fifty years of age, despite the absence of gray hairs, and, when he smiled, showed a set of white pointed teeth, such as are seen in the carnivorous animals.

"I was expecting you," said he, when Orson Oxx had accepted his invitation and seated himself, "although I did not know the train, else I would have sent some one to meet you."

"It was better that you did not do so; I preferred that no one should know I was coming here."

"Not ashamed of what you are doing?"

Mr. Langdon smiled in a way that displayed his numerous pointed teeth, as he asked this question, which was probably meant as a joke.

"I never engage in any business of which I am ashamed."

Orson Oxx looked serious when he made this reply, as though he accepted the remark in the same light.

Truth to tell, he disliked this man from the first and his prejudice was increasing every minute. He believed he was about to make some dishonorable proposition, but he concluded to hear him through, and then be guided by his own sense of propriety.

"I was only in jest," the host hastened to say; "of course I understood what you meant. Did you hear anything about me in the village?"

"I made no inquiries, except as to where your house was located."

"They hold no particular love for me down there," remarked Mr. Langdon, with another horrid grin, "because I don't permit them to swindle and humbug me as they used to do with my brother, who lived here before me."

Orson Oxx made no comment on this statement, for it was of no interest to him.

"If you had inquired of some of them, they would have told you that I bear the name of The Winking Demon. That's an odd title, ain't it?"

"It is, unquestionably, and it is hard to understand why it should be applied to you."

"Not at all. When they make me angry or I make up my mind to take some important step, I wink my right eye. They have noticed it and the expression is common that when old Langdon winks his glass eye, somebody is going to get hurt."

"Then I hope it doesn't wink often."

"Too often for the comfort of some folks; I expect it to wink a good many times before you and I are through this business."

"If I am not mistaken, there is a star in the heavens which is sometimes known by the title you apply to yourself?"

"You are correct," said the host with a grin, "and here is an extraordinary fact: There is a very curious star in the sky whose name is Algol and whose Arabic name means The Demon. It is sometimes called the Winking Demon. It is the brightest of the little cluster known as the Head of Medusa, which according to the old fable, Persens carries in his hand as he hurries to the rescue of Andromeda."

"Why should this star bear such a peculiar name?"

"On account of its singular variations. It is sometimes a star of the second magnitude; then it fades to the fourth magnitude, and in a few days regains its former brightness. It is wonderful that it should do this, but the more wonderful, because Algol is a sun probably larger

than our sun, having an enormous dark body revolving around it at tremendous speed."

"That is remarkable indeed, but the heavens are made up of wonders, as is the earth also."

"But the curious feature about this is that the name of the star Algol is the same as mine, and that, as I said, in Arabic it signifies The Demon, so that these boors of the village in giving me the name of the Winking Demon have, as we may say, builded better than they knew."

And the Winking Demon smiled again, and, to the surprise of his disgusted visitor, the artificial eye distinctly winked.

"All that is well enough in its way," said Orson Oxx, who felt much less interest than would be supposed, "but I do not see its connection with the errand which has brought me to Ardville."

"I beg your pardon," said the host, lighting a cigar and proffering one to his visitor, "we may as well come to business."

CHAPTER VI.

ORSON OXX GAINS SOME INTERESTING INFORMATION.

BEFORE making known the important matter on which he wished to consult the great detective, Mr. Langdon passed around the room, and assured himself that the two doors were securely locked.

"You will understand, Mr. Oxx, that I repose the utmost confidence in you: I am about to tell you something which no other living man besides myself knows."

The detective nodded to signify that he "caught on."

"I have a niece; her name is Ethel Langdon; she is the daughter of my brother, and who died in her infancy; her mother perished at her birth and I am her guardian."

Mr. Orson Oxx inclined his head to signify that he comprehended everything told him thus far.

"All that is nothing extraordinary, but there is a young man in the case."

"There generally is."

"My niece, Ethel, has been away to school for six years, but has been living with me for the past year. She is nineteen years old."

"Is she in the house now?"

"No; she spends much of her time with the sick and poor in the village."

This confirmed the suspicion which had just taken shape in the brain of the detective: the young lady whom he saw in the room of the aged invalid was Ethel Langdon, the niece of the Winking Demon!

"While she was away at school she formed the acquaintance of a young man, and, as might be expected, the two are dead in love with each other, or what is as bad, they imagine they are."

"There is nothing wonderful in that."

"This young man is a native of this village, but he and my niece never became acquainted with each other, until something over a year ago. He went to West Point when seventeen, was employed by the Government in the capacity of civil engineer, and, while doing this duty, in some infernal way, he and Ethel met."

"I have known such things to happen."

"He has resigned from the service of the Government, and is now overseeing the building of a large bridge across the river a few miles to the west. He is home nearly every night and he and Ethel meet, often in my own house."

"His name?"

"Brayton Russell; we have been tormented by fire-bugs for the last few months. One of their acts was to burn down the home of this Russell, while he was absent, and his mother perished in the flames."

"That was dreadful."

"Yes, I wish it had been Russell himself."

And the terrible eye winked in emphasis of this sanguinary expression.

"You do not like this young man?"

"I can't say that I have any particular hatred of him," said the Winking Demon, in odd contradiction of the horrible wish he had just expressed, "but there is one thing which I am determined on; he shall not become the husband of my niece."

This was uttered with such fierceness that the glaring orb, behind the bunch of hair, was eclipsed by the eyelid.

"It is my duty to say to you that the task of which you speak has been attempted many times, but in the majority of cases, it results in disastrous failure. Given a young man and a young lady, whose hearts are set on each other and they will find some way of meeting and becoming united."

"It shall not be in this case," exclaimed the Winking Demon, with all his old-time fierceness; "I never tried anything and failed and I shall not fail now."

"More than likely the two are together this minute."

"I don't doubt it; he will bring her home from her infernally foolish visits to the sick."

"Why do you permit that?"

"To throw them off their guard; I want to get their confidence; don't you see I will have an immense advantage."

"If these two are so fond of each other, why not make a virtue of necessity and permit them to marry?"

Mr. Langdon quivered with passion; he winked both eyes several times and his voice was husky, as he answered:

"I have reasons for preventing their marriage which I cannot make known. Suffice it to say that it is all-sufficient. The combined wealth of Vanderbilt, Gould and Astor wouldn't budge me from my purpose: they shall never be man and wife; that I swear!"

And he brought down his fist with a fierceness which almost split the table, his frightful right eye doing full duty with its mate.

"Well?"

"I've sent for you to help me prevent the impending marriage."

Orson Oxx smiled and opened his mouth to speak, when his host resumed:

"I know what you mean to say, that this is not in your line of business, that you never attempted anything of the kind and you would prefer to engage in something more legitimate. But I have heard of you, Orson Oxx, as one of the keenest and brightest men who ever followed the profession of detective for the fun of the thing. I tell you that this *must* be prevented; you must throw your whole energies in the work; you *must* succeed; you will earn the largest fee of your life."

"Have you any plan in your mind in which you wish me to give you assistance?"

This was thrown out as a feeler. Orson knew the man before him was a thorough scoundrel, degraded enough to commit any crime. He must have some powerful motive for preventing the marriage of his niece, since he was ready to proceed to any length, and wished to secure the aid of the great detective to accomplish his wishes.

The world did not contain enough wealth to tempt Orson Oxx to do a dishonorable thing, but he would troll the Winking Demon along, until he could gain some more definite idea of his purpose.

"I do not understand one thing, Mr. Langdon; you say your niece shall not marry Brayton Russell; you may prevent the union for awhile, but suppose they make up their minds some years from now—"

"I should have explained that she is not to marry *before* reaching her majority; after that I don't care a picayune."

"That puts a very different face on the matter. You simply wish to prevent their marriage during a period of less than two years."

"That's it."

"You have legal control over her until she becomes of age?"

"Yes, but what does it amount to?"

"Very little; can't you persuade her to wait out of regard for your wishes?"

"I might get a conditional promise from her, but I am not safe."

"What then can be done?"

"You must work with Russell."

"But what can I do with him? He is as old as I am, and considers himself capable of attending to his own business. If I should venture to make any suggestion, he would snub me as I deserve."

"Do you think so?"

The Winking Demon fixed his eyes on Orson Oxx, and the two gazed steadily at each other for several seconds.

Each was trying to read the thoughts of the other, and the detective succeeded.

He knew it as distinctly as if Algol Langdon had put it in plain English, that he wished to engage the detective to put Brayton Russell to death.

The Winking Demon dare not undertake it himself, but he was willing to pay a large price to have it done.

"I think I understand you," said Orson Oxx without moving a muscle.

"I think so too."

"What's the price?"

"Ten thousand dollars."

"Mum's the word," said Orson Oxx placing his finger on his lips.

The Winking Demon nodded his head to signify that he also understood matters.

An ordinary business transaction would have required some more negotiation, but the reader will agree that this was altogether an extraordinary transaction.

CHAPTER VII.

A MYSTERIOUS VISIT.

ORSON OXX held a comparatively brief interview with Algol Langdon, the Winking Demon, and yet he picked up a good deal of information in that time.

He had learned that the extraordinary man was a most conscienceless villain, who was desirous of hiring the detective to make way with Brayton Russell.

He was not only willing but eager to have the young man killed for the sake of preventing his marriage with his niece.

The wretch's offer of such an enormous fee was the strongest proof of his sentiments on that point.

The Man of Iron resolved to secure all the in-

formation possible from Langdon, and then use it to the advantage of both Brayton Russell and the lovely Ethel, the "angel of the sick-room."

"I will look into the matter," said he, concealing his disgust as best he could. "It is necessary that I should understand the ground before venturing upon it."

"Of course," replied his host, rising to his feet to escort his visitor to the door.

As the scoundrel did so, Orson noticed what escaped him when the fellow turned the keys in the locks.

The Winking Demon showed a perceptible lameness when he walked across the floor.

His gait was similar to that of the incendiary whom the detective strove to overtake, and which was the means of placing the officer in such imminent peril.

Possibly it was a coincidence; possibly it was more.

"Have you been home all the evening?" asked Orson.

"Most of the time. I took a little stroll down the lane before you came, but did not go any further."

"Of course my visit to you must be known only to yourself."

"It is unnecessary to state that. When shall I see you again?"

"Very probably I shall call to-morrow night. Will you be at home?"

"I know of nothing to prevent."

The detective bade his host good-night and walked out into the darkness.

"I must see Brayton Russell without delay," was his conclusion, as he walked thoughtfully down the tree-lined lane leading to the main highway.

"I shall prove my gratitude to him for his kindness this evening; he is likely to need it—"

The keen eyes of the detective suddenly caught the outlines of two figures approaching silently toward him.

They were man and woman, the latter leaning upon the arm of the other.

"Is this Mr. Brayton Russell?" asked Oxx, stopping in front of the couple and raising his hat.

"Yes, sir; what do you want?"

"When you return to Ardville, please call at the Delaware House. I wish to see you on important business."

"What is the name?"

"George Gordon. I will be on the lookout for you; shall I expect you?"

"I will be there within a half-hour."

"Thanks; you will not regret it?"

And the two disappeared from mutual sight. Just as Orson Oxx entered the main highway, he met a closed carriage drawn by two horses on a walk.

He would have thought little of it, had it not been for the fact that they turned into the lane.

The team seemed to be hardly moving, so slow was its pace.

"It may be all right," he muttered, "and I know of no good reason why I should interest myself in it. I have an engagement to meet Russell at the village in half an hour."

And with this conclusion, he resumed his walk in the direction of Ardville.

But he always regretted most bitterly his failure to turn about and follow the vehicle, for its night visit to the home of the Winking Demon had a fearful significance.

Meanwhile Brayton Russell and Ethel Langdon walked slowly up the avenue in the direction of the homestead. Their words were low, and soft, and tender, for were they not all the world to each other? Did she not look upon him as the noblest and best of men, whose love to her was her life, her being, her all? And was he not morally convinced that Ethel was the sweetest, most amiable, and most enchanting of her sex? And had they not plighted their troth, and were they not resolved that nothing but death should prevent their becoming one in the near future?

"Oh, turn again, fair Inez,
Before the fall of night,
For fear the moon should shine alone,
And stars unrivaled bright;
And blessed will the lover be
That walks beneath their light,
And breathes the love against thy cheek
I dare not even write."

They parted like true lovers when they reached the porch of the great house, where Ethel made her home.

The tender, yearning embrace—the warm kiss repeated—the ardent words whispered; then all over again, and the happy maiden passed through the broad door, and the equally happy youth strode off through the night in the direction of the village, whose lights twinkled in the distance.

Brayton Russell scarcely gave a thought to the carriage which he encountered but a short ways off. His imaginings were with the lovely being with whom he had left his heart and who had promised to be his bride within a few coming months.

As he neared the little town of Ardville, he

began to think of the stranger whom he had encountered in the lane and whom he had agreed to meet at the inn.

Meanwhile the closed carriage halted in front of the home of Ethel Langdon and was turned so as to face the other way. The driver did not leave his seat, but sat with the lines in hand, ready to start on an instant's notice.

Two men carefully pushed open the door at the side and stepped out. They exchanged a few words in a low voice; then passed up the walk and sounded the knocker.

The Winking Demon must have been expecting them, for he opened the door himself the next instant.

He grinned and winked his artificial eye, as he conducted them into his library.

The negro servant who was hovering about the main hall, wondering what all this meant, saw a great deal more to bewilder him.

Shortly after, he caught the sound of a light footstep and observed the outlines of the beautiful Ethel, as she too entered the library.

Then the negro heard the murmur of voices, but grew tired of waiting and made his way to his own apartment, but had scarcely prepared himself for his couch when he was horrified to hear the scream of a young lady.

Then followed sounds as if parties were struggling; then a smothered shriek again, and the front door was banged shut with a fierceness that caused every window in the house to rattle.

The servant made desperate haste to don his garments, but by the time he had done so, and had dashed out by the rear door, it was all over.

He caught the noise of carriage-wheels, and it told him the horses were going down the lane at breakneck speed. The driver was lashing them into a dead run, at the imminent risk of his life and those whom he carried.

By and by the sounds died out and all became still.

The negro crept back to his apartment muttering:

"As sure as heben dey hab run off wid Miss Ethel and dey'll neber bring her back!"

Alas, he spoke the truth!

CHAPTER VIII.

BRAYTON RUSSELL MAKES THE ACQUAINTANCE OF A FRIEND.

WHILE the mysterious incidents were in progress at the homestead, just outside of Ardville, Orson Oxx, the Man of Iron, was seated in an upper room of the Delaware House in confidential converse with Brayton Russell.

The detective had waited for the young engineer and made known his own personality, as soon as they were alone.

The civil engineer, as may be supposed, was amazed, for he had not dreamed of the identity of his new acquaintance.

When it was all made plain, he laughed heartily and congratulated Oxx on the hurricane-like fashion in which he disposed of Shadrach Yelland and "Sam Six-Eye," who were in favor of handing him over to the mob to be torn asunder, as may be said.

"Both are terribly bungled up," declared Russell, "and they have been subjected to no end of jeering because they allowed a single person to get away with them in that fashion, though I must come in for an equal share of blame with them."

"Mr. Six-Eye was in the bar-room, and I had quite a talk with him before you came. He said the hell hound, as he called him, struck him with a chair when he was in the act of stooping over to pick his hat from the floor, and, if he—that is Mr. Six-Eye—had had a second's warning, he would have laid out the 'hell-hound' referred to, adding also that he would give a thousand dollars for a chance to paralyze and pulverize him."

Brayton Russell laughed again, but Orson Oxx had more serious business on hand.

"Mr. Russell, the professional detective as a rule does not take any one into his confidence, but I shall violate the laws of the profession and tell you some things that will surprise you."

"I assure you everything shall be held sacred by me."

"I owe you a debt of gratitude for your kindness this evening, but, without that motive, I should feel it my duty to tell you that your life is in danger."

Such an announcement is calculated to disturb the nerves of any person.

Brayton Russell, brave as he unquestionably was, started and caught his breath in a way which showed he was not prepared for the information.

"I was not aware that I had given cause for any such enmity," said the civil engineer.

"You have not done so willfully, but the offense has been given, nevertheless."

"Who is mine enemy?"

"Algol Langdon, the Winking Demon!"

Brayton looked searchingly in the face of Orson Oxx, for several seconds, and said:

"Surely you are mistaken. He has encouraged my attentions to his niece and knows we are engaged in marriage."

"What sort of man is this person who bears the singular but I must say appropriate name?"

"Truth compels me to answer that he bears a very unsavory reputation."

"I am aware of that; above all he is a hypocrite."

"But you never met him before this evening."

"That was long enough."

"Has he threatened me?"

"He swears that you and his niece shall not marry before she becomes twenty-one and she now lacks something like two years of that age."

"But, why has he not signified his wishes to me or his niece?"

"Would you be willing to wait two years, if he should do so?"

"No, I'll be hanged if I would!" was the natural exclamation of the lover.

"Would she?"

"I'm bound to add that she and I are unanimous on that subject," replied the lover with a smile and a blush.

"Therefore it would be useless for him to use moral persuasion."

"But why not make known his sentiments to us?"

"Because he is a hypocrite; it is his nature."

"But if he had stated his wishes a year ago, Ethel might have given her promise to wait until she became twenty-one."

Orson Oxx shook his head with a laugh.

"My dear sir, you know better than that; but, without speculating on that matter, let me tell you that Algol Langdon sent to New York for me; I have been out to his house; we have had a business talk; he swears by all that is sacred and profane that you and his niece shall not be married before she reaches her legal majority."

"How will he prevent it?" asked Russell, with a chuckle.

"He wanted me to help him; he offered me a large sum of money, if I would succeed in getting you out of the way, so that all danger would be removed. You can speculate as to the meaning of those words, if you choose."

"Knowing the man as I do, I should give them the worst possible construction."

"That is what I did."

"You did not ask for particulars?"

"No, I did not want them."

"I do not understand why he should be so deadly opposed to my marriage within two years, but indifferent to it afterward."

"Nor do I."

"It may be another piece of hypocrisy on his part."

"His opposition to your marriage with his niece is anything but hypocrisy."

"I mean his willingness that it should take place after the lapse of a couple of years."

"Very probably he is insincere in that, believing that if the wedding is deferred for that time it will be equivalent to an indefinite postponement."

"I cannot imagine why he should feel such mortal hatred of me," said Russell thoughtfully; "I am able to support his niece in comfort and would never consent to receive any assistance from him."

"He has the reputation of being very wealthy, has he not?"

"He is supposed to be."

"More than likely the bulk of his wealth is held in trust for his niece and must be turned over to her on certain conditions, when she reaches the age of twenty-one. The father of Ethel may have left some oddly-worded will, which is the cause of Algol's opposition to this impending union."

"I am convinced you are not far from the truth; but, let that go and tell me how it is my life is in danger."

"Of course under no circumstances would it be in danger from any one except Algol Langdon, or his agents."

"He is a coward," said Brayton with a laugh.

"But he has money and can hire those who do not fear to take human life."

"I understand and will be on my guard."

CHAPTER IX.

PROSPERITY JOHNSON IMPARTS SOME STARTLING TIDINGS.

AS Orson Oxx had become fully satisfied of the sinister purpose of the Winking Demon, he decided to spend the major portion of the following day in "browsing around" Ardville and picking up some points that might prove of value.

After sauntering beyond the village, he put himself through quite a metamorphosis, by which he was changed into an honest-looking old farmer, with a fringe of sandy whiskers under his chin, a pair of large, bowed silver spectacles, a broad, flapping hat and a short frock-coat considerably humped up in the back, on account of his round shoulders.

Although he had never wrought a day in all his life upon a farm, yet Orson Oxx was fond of assuming the character of Josh Whitcomb. He liked to be taken for an exceedingly verdant countryman, as it gave him a good chance to "play it" on certain parties.

The information picked up by the detective,

the night before, gave him as full a knowledge of the real character of Algol Langdon as he needed; but he strongly suspected that this man was one, if not the principal "fire-bug" who had caused such destruction and suffering in Ardville during the past few months.

The fact that the incendiary of whom the detective caught a glimpse, had the same slight limp as the Winking Demon was what gave the officer his first suspicion. But for that it is scarcely likely such a thought would have entered the head of Orson Oxx.

"It seems to me his lameness, slight as it is, would have given him away before this; but he has been very careful, though it looked as if he forgot his caution when I came upon him."

The detective was desirous of learning something about the absence of Langdon, the night before. The Demon had admitted that he went out for a short walk, but insisted it was not extended beyond the lane.

"There are a good many people in this world who walk with a limp, more or less, and I may be altogether off respecting the guilt of the old scamp."

The honest-looking old farmer walked into the lane leading to the home of Mr. Langdon, his face beaming with benevolence and kindness. He had formed a pretext for securing an interview with the man with the single eye, and he relied on his own wit to pull him through, when the interview should take place.

But these calculations were knocked in the head, so to speak, when the same negro who answered his summons the night before, told him his master was absent and would not be back before night.

"Bless me!" exclaimed the visitor in dismay, "after my coming all the way from Dutchess county to see him! Didn't he leave any word for me?"

"Your name am what?"

"Perkins—Hosea Perkins; I wanted to talk to him about selling him my farm that he spoke about to me, week afore last."

"I didn't hear him say nuffin."

"Bless me! how blasted queer. What's your name, my good man?"

"Prosperity Johnson, sah!"

"Well, Prosperity," said the honest-looking Mr. Perkins, "tell the niece of Mr. Langdon that I wish to have a few words with her."

"But de niece, Miss Ethel, am not at home!"

Orson Oxx was genuinely surprised.

Nothing was more natural than that both should happen to be absent at the same hour, but it was not that itself which startled the detective. It was the expression which crossed the dusky face before him when the announcement was made. That, and a certain tremor in the voice of the African, told him like a flash, that something extraordinary had taken place since his call of the evening before.

Orson Oxx was quick to catch on to such evidence, which in this instance was instantly perceptible.

"Well, Prosperity," he said quite heartily, "you are at home and I would like to have a little chat with you."

The silver dollar and the smile which accompanied it were both of the bland order, and the old farmer had rendered himself "solid" with the negro from the beginning.

"Come right in," assented Prosperity, "and I'll talk wid you a good long while."

"Thank you, my friend; I'm sure we'll get along well together," said the visitor, taking off his broad hat as he stepped within the hall and the door was closed behind him.

He hoped that the servant would conduct him to the library, and he turned toward the door; but Prosperity did not forget his duty in that respect, and led him up-stairs to his own humble apartment in the rear, apologizing by saying that they could talk there without fear of interruption from any one.

"Are you the only servant in the house, Prosperity?" asked the visitor, seating himself on a rather rickety chair, crossing his legs and depositing his broad-brimmed hat on his knee.

"Sometimes de sister of Mr. Langdon am here, but not often; she am deaf as a door-post, and habn't been here since last month."

"Then you are the only one at present?"

"Yas, but my wife, who libs in de little house down by de road, comes here twice a week and does de wasbin and ironin'. She am li'ble to come in any time, and she hab so much cur'osity dat she mought go to axin' questions, and would tell Mr. Langdon if she sawed you heah."

Orson Oxx did not see why the servant should object to this, inasmuch as he had called to see Mr. Langdon, and had not intimated that there was any secrecy about his business.

But he was glad of the precaution of his sable friend.

The detective won the confidence of Prosperity to that extent that, within the succeeding fifteen minutes, the African told him all he knew of the mysterious occurrence of the night before.

Orson Oxx was amazed. He had never dreamed of any such action on the part of Algol Langdon. What did it mean?

He questioned the negro closely, but his lack of knowledge on the more important points was

exasperating. He had not seen the face of either of the two men. He simply knew that two persons, strangers to him, had entered the house, and when they departed they took Ethel Langdon with them.

There could be no doubt that she had been carried off forcibly and against her will. The horses which drew the closed carriage were driven at terrific speed down the dark lane. The master had ridden away on horseback at an early hour, simply telling his servant that he would be back before evening, but he had not dropped a hint of the taking-off of his niece.

And Prosperity understood his master too well to give the least intimation that he knew anything of what had taken place.

It was an alarming story told by the simple-hearted servant, and it caused no little self-reproach on the part of Orson Oxx because he had not obeyed his impulse to follow the closed carriage the evening before when he met it.

CHAPTER X.

AN UNSATISFACTORY INTERVIEW.

HAVING extracted from the African all that he knew concerning the alarming occurrence of the previous evening, Orson Oxx now came to the subject, which was in his mind, when he left the village.

This required great delicacy, for the detective was particularly desirous that the servant should not suspect the drift of the investigation.

"Prosperity, is your master generally at home in the evening?"

"He am—dat is a part ob de time."

"Was he home last evening?"

"Yes, sah; he had a visitor—a handsome young man; I tried to hear what dey was talkin' bout but dey was too keerful."

"But was he not out before that time?"

"Yes, sah."

"For how long?"

"More dan an hour."

"You heard the alarm of fire in the village?"

"Yes, sah; Mr. Langdon got home jes' afore."

"How do you know that?"

"I had jes' come in from de barn, when I see'd him pass frough de gate."

"Was he in a hurry?"

"I should giggle; he dashed frough de gate on a run and den stopped on de porch and stood lookin' off toward de willage; when I come up he was pantin' as though he had been runnin' wery hard."

"Did he say anything to you?"

"He said, 'Wal, Prosperity, dey am habin' anoder bonfire down in de willage,' and den he sort ob chuckled to hisself."

"Is that the only time you ever saw him do anything of the kind?"

"No, sah; not by a jugful."

"When did you notice it before last night?"

"Dar was a fire two weeks ago and he done jes' de same; last month, he was in such a hurry dat he climbed ober de fence at de oder side de yard and fell over wid so much violence dat I feared he had broke his neck."

Orson Oxx had heard enough.

He carefully watched the manner of the African, while making these interesting disclosures, and was certain he did not suspect how strongly they pointed to the guilt of his master.

The detective himself talked in the most matter-of-fact manner, and gradually turned the conversation away from the delicate subject.

"I am much obliged to you, Prosperity, for your kindness," said the visitor rising to go.

"You's wery welcome and I hopes you will come ag'in; I'll tell Mr. Langdon dat you'll be back to-morrow, shall I?"

"Do me the favor, my good fellow, not to say a word to him about my call. If you find yourself compelled to do so, say an old farmer dropped in to ask about selling him some land."

This request was accompanied by another donation in the shape of a silver dollar, and the negro promised that the wish of the visitor should be remembered.

A half-hour later, Orson Oxx, still in the guise of a farmer, as a matter of course, was in his room of the Delaware House meditating on what he had learned at the homestead of the Winking Demon.

"It signifies only one thing," he said to himself; "that scoundrel has sent his niece away with the purpose of placing her beyond the reach of Russell. But, many is the time that that same thing has been done, and many is the time it has failed. Love laughs at locks, and the Winking Demon proved his belief in the law, when he proposed that Russell should be killed. Ought I to go to Russell at once with the astounding news? No! for he will learn it within a few hours. I can employ myself more profitably. I have a good half-day before me, and I may gain a clew as to who the parties were that took her away, and whither they went."

The detective acted on his own suggestion. Still disguised, so that no one would suspect his identity, he skirmished through the village for almost the entire afternoon.

The result was anything but satisfactory. There was but a single place where vehicles could be hired. The demand for them was so slight, that the proprietor assured him not one had gone out of his establishment for nearly a week past.

A little doubtful of the truth of this statement, farmer Perkins asked the privilege of examining his stock, as he thought likely he would need one before night.

He thus gained an inspection of all the vehicles on hand. It was easy for a sharp-eyed detective to tell from the appearance of these, as well as from certain other indications, that the owner spoke the truth. The inference, therefore, was clear that the closed carriage came from some point outside of Ardville.

"The abductors are strangers to the place; they came in their own conveyance from a distance; probably The Demon hired them in New York, and they have driven many miles."

When darkness came, Orson had used every means at his command, but without obtaining anything like substantial information.

At a comparatively early hour, he made his way to the other hotel where Brayton Russell staid, with the purpose of telling him what he had learned, but the young man had gone out to the Homestead, as it was called.

Orson Oxx lost no time in following him.

When the detective stepped upon the porch of the great house, appearing precisely as he did the evening before, he heard loud voices within the library.

The parties speaking were so excited, that the officer would have been compelled to close his ears had he wished to avoid hearing what was said.

Two men were holding an interview that was anything but satisfactory to either.

These men were Brayton Russell and Algol Langdon, the Winking Demon.

CHAPTER XI.

A VILLAIN DEEP AND DARK.

WHEN Brayton Russell reached the Homestead on that autumn evening, it was without the slightest suspicion that anything had gone amiss.

The negro Prosperity admitted him, and, as directed by his master, who had been home but a short time, he was conducted to the library, where the two men greeted each other.

Algol Langdon was not long in coming to the point.

After saluting his visitor with stately courtesy, he said:

"I suppose you have called to see my niece?"

"That is my pleasant errand," replied the young engineer, with a bow and a smile.

"Well, you can't see her."

"Ah, why not?"

"Because she isn't at home."

"When did she go away?"

"Last night."

Russell's heart was beating rapidly, for he knew by instinct that something important was coming.

"Last night! how was that?"

"That's how it was," replied the master of the house, with a distinct wink of his vitreous organ.

"But her departure was rather sudden."

"Yes, rather."

"Where did she go?"

"She sailed to-day for Europe."

As may be supposed, Brayton Russell's anger was becoming hot. He now began speaking faster and louder, as did Langdon.

It was at this juncture that Orson Oxx stepped softly upon the porch, he having been so close behind the lover all the way from the village, that he would have seen him, had there been the least moonlight to assist.

The reader will understand, therefore, that from this point forward Orson Oxx did not lose a syllable, he standing motionless, and listening outside the door.

"You say she has gone to Europe?" demanded Brayton, angrily.

"That's what I said."

"I don't believe it."

It will be borne in mind that the lover, who was somewhat impetuous, had been convinced of the hypocrisy and treachery of this man, during the last twenty-four hours.

Russell had reflected a great deal on what had been told him by his friend the detective.

He had dwelt upon the matter so much that he became unduly excited over it.

It was the cause of his hastening to the Homestead much earlier in the evening than was his custom.

He was in a suspicious mood when he entered the library, and ready to put the worst construction on anything and everything.

Hence his indignation was not only natural but inevitable.

His hot reply to Langdon angered that individual also, although he succeeded in keeping back any manifestation of it, beyond the elevation and increase of pace in his voice.

"It's a matter of no consequence to me whether you believe it or not."

"Why did she go to Europe?"

"You just now said you didn't believe she went."

"And I do not believe it."

"Then why your question?"

"I would have your full explanation."

"She has gone to Europe, then—because—I thought it best she should go."

"Did she go alone?"

"Of course not; I would not be so thoughtless as to send her on such a long voyage alone."

"Who went with her?"

"That I prefer to keep to myself."

"When will she return?"

"Perhaps in a couple of years—perhaps never."

By this time Brayton Russell was indignant enough to leap upon the wretch and strangle him as he sat in his chair, glaring across the table, and winking both eyes continually.

"You haven't told me *why* you sent her abroad in such haste."

"No, I'm aware I haven't."

"Will you give me no explanation?"

"I know of no law which compels me to do so."

"It is not necessary; you did it to prevent her becoming my wife."

"You have guessed it the first time."

"And you shall fail! By the heaven above us! she shall become my wife, despite all the scoundrels this side of the Atlantic, and chief among them I include you."

"You are welcome to fume and bluster; go ahead and do what you wish; he laughs best who laughs last."

Brayton Russell had sprung to his feet: he stood with one hand holding his hat, while he shook his fist at the Winking Demon, his eyes flashing with consuming anger, as the words fell sharp and clear from his lips:

"It's open war now, Algol Langdon! It is war until one of us goes to the wall! I welcome the fight, though you would give a big sum to have me put out of the way! Go on and do your utmost; you have lied to me; you have shown no mercy to your niece; you have been treacherous to both. We are fighting at short range. I warn you to expect no quarter from me, as I shall receive none from you!"

And Brayton Russell strode out of the room and the front door in such angry haste, that he failed to see the motionless figure standing close to the outer column of the porch.

With his breast a perfect volcano of passion he plunged into the darkness and vanished.

CHAPTER XII.

ORSON OXX SUFFERS THE CONSEQUENCES OF UNPROFESSIONAL CONFIDENCE IN A FRIEND.

IN the early days of Orson Oxx's professional career as a detective (though he persisted in claiming to be only an amateur), he had suffered several times from a misplaced though natural confidence in others.

He finally resolved to do that which every successful detective must perforce do: he would seal his lips to his most intimate friend. And yet, as we have shown, he violated this vow on the night we re-introduce him to the reader, for he had told his friend Brayton Russell that Algol, the Winking Demon, had offered him, the detective, a princely sum of money to put the engineer and lover out of the way, or in plain English to compass his death.

The detective had repeated the words of the villain to Brayton Russell himself.

This was unnecessary, for it would have been an easy matter to put the warning in such shape that the imperiled man would have taken all precautions, without knowing the particulars of the threat.

When Orson Oxx indulged in this burst of confidence, he added what seemed superfluous, a request that the young man would never drop a hint of what was said.

The promise was given, and yet, while Orson Oxx stood on the porch of Algol Langdon's house, he overheard Brayton Russell repeat the very words to the man of all others who should not know them.

The Winking Demon was a deep and dark villain, who needed nothing more than that which had been said to him by the impetuous lover.

The consequences of Brayton Russell's angry burst were certain to be more serious than would be supposed.

While a good result might be to make Langdon more careful of taking any steps against the youth, yet he would be quick to know that the great detective Orson Oxx was attempting the "double cross" upon him. That is, while considering the proposition that had been hinted to him, the officer had gone straight to Russell and revealed the whole thing. What would be the inevitable consequence?

All the immense advantage the detective would have been sure to gain by being accepted as an ally of the instigator of the diabolical plot was swept away.

It was impossible to overestimate this advantage.

It would have enabled Orson Oxx, as he believed, to learn the whereabouts of Ethel Langdon and to take measures to entrap the villain, who was a murderous incendiary as well as a

cowardly plotter against the lives and happiness of others.

Now Algol Langdon who had brought Orson Oxx from the Metropolis to assist him in his fiendish work would know that instead of an ally, he was a dangerous enemy.

He would be on his guard against him.

He would use deceit in his dealings.

He would employ every means to mislead the great detective.

The reader will see the loss which Orson Oxx had suffered.

He fully realized it himself.

It was as if he had reared a tall, stately structure, with infinite care and labor, and, just as it was finished, and he was about to move into it, he should discover that its foundations had been undermined by the sea and it was about to fall.

And yet, it cannot be said that Orson Oxx blamed Brayton Russell.

He appreciated the tremendous excitement and passion which swayed the young man and lover.

His feelings were beyond control at the moment the compromising words escaped his lips.

Russell could not have been induced deliberately to betray his friend.

He had done it unwittingly and no doubt felt poignant chagrin and remorse the instant he realized his forgetfulness.

But had he not been told the words of his enemy, he could not have repeated them to that enemy.

"It was I who told him," muttered Orson Oxx, "therefore I am alone to blame."

Such were the thoughts which surged through the brain of the detective, during the brief minutes he stood on the porch, after hearing the startling expression of his friend.

He counted himself fortunate that he had caught the words.

For thereby he was warned.

He knew that when he stepped across the threshold of that house and entered the library, the Winking Demon looked upon him as an enemy.

But Langdon could not know that the detective was aware of the change of sentiment on the part of himself.

Therefore, on that point, Orson Oxx could claim an advantage which was not so slight as it might seem at first.

The detective stood motionless several minutes, then stamped his feet on the porch, rubbed them quite briskly on the mat, and, with considerable bluster sounded the heavy brass knocker.

Prosperity Johnson admitted him, as on the evening before, with never a thought of his identity with the honest old farmer who had paid him a couple of dollars for the pleasure of interviewing him some hours previous.

"Last night I entered this building as a trusted ally," thought Orson Oxx, as he placed his hat on the rack at his right and moved through the hall to the door opening into the library. "Ay, as an ally; he did not fully trust me, but I would have gained his confidence this evening. Now he knows I am an enemy; thus the Damascus blade of Saladin is wrenched from his hand on the very eve of battle. And," added the detective, pursuing the simile, with a certain grim humor, "the worst of it all is that it is the fault of no one but Saladin himself."

CHAPTER XIII.

PARRY AND THRUST.

ALGOL LANGDON greeted his visitor with a gush which did not deceive him for a single instant.

He rose from his chair, limped rapidly across the room and shook hands with remarkable effusiveness.

"I am glad indeed to see you," remarked the prince of plotters, dropping into his seat on the other side of the table, and glaring across in his usual binocular fashion.

Orson Oxx nodded his head to signify the compliment was accepted.

"I have been away most of the day and returned only a short time ago. How have you occupied yourself?"

"I have not been particularly busy; last night I met Brayton Russell and had a long talk with him."

"Ah!"

There was a world of meaning in the exclamation.

"I have not spoken to him since."

"He was here a short time ago; you must have met him."

"I saw a man hurrying away in the dark, but I said nothing to him."

"How did your interview result?"

"It was satisfactory only to a moderate degree."

"Ah!"

"I found he was resolved on marrying your niece, despite opposition from any quarter. Such, you will recall, was my supposition."

"You were sagacious in that respect; but what reason had he to speak of opposition from any one, when I had never given him cause to suspect it?"

"I am afraid I was not as guarded in what I uttered as I should have been."

"How was that?"

"Haven't you said something to your niece within the past few weeks calculated to make her think you were not altogether satisfied with her suitor?"

Langdon was thoughtful for a minute.

"I believe I did drop a hint that a young lady of her attractions and accomplishments should aim higher than a civil engineer, even though he was a graduate of West Point."

It was a chance arrow which Orson Oxx launched, but it struck home.

"That's it then!" exclaimed the detective with a laugh; "you know two such spoonies have no secrets from each other; your niece has repeated your words to Russell, doubtless magnifying them. Young men in his situation are peculiarly sensitive and he must have brooded over the matter."

"Did you gain his confidence?"

"I tried to do so."

"But do not know whether you succeeded?"

"Of that I cannot be certain."

"Did he seem to feel any suspicion of me?"

"He does, most assuredly."

"Why is that?"

"He says you are treacherous; that your cordiality toward him is hypocrisy; he believes you would as lief kill him as not; he says you are a coward and would not do it yourself, but would hire others."

The Winking Demon looked straight at the detective and one side of his mouth smiled.

The other side of his mouth did not move.

Then in a low, soft voice, brimming over with significance, he said:

"I wonder who could have put that idea in his head?"

"It must have been you, who were not guarded enough in concealing your true sentiments."

"I think not."

Despite Orson Oxx's assurance, he felt ill at ease with the keen black eye of the Winking Demon fixed upon him, while the other blinked and glared at him like the headlight of a locomotive through the woods.

"However," added the host, "I don't know as it is a matter of any importance: since I saw you last night I have made other arrangements."

"In what respect?"

"I concluded, after debating over the matter with myself, that I had gone at it wrong. Instead of working with Brayton Russell it was my niece who should be influenced to defer her marriage for a couple of years."

"I think I suggested something of the kind."

"I therefore sent her away last night, after she had been escorted home by Russell, who was notified of the truth this evening, only a short time before you called."

"May I ask whither you sent the young lady?"

"She sailed this forenoon for Europe."

"And Brayton Russell knew nothing of it until to-night?"

"Not a syllable."

"He was somewhat surprised?"

"I should say so."

"And will doubtless make his arrangements to follow her across the ocean?"

"He is a big enough fool to attempt it."

"And you have concluded not to interfere with him?"

"That is my decision. Do you not think it wise?"

"It is undoubtedly. It seems to me further, Mr. Langdon, that having done all that was necessary yourself, there is no special call for my services."

"You are correct. I have nothing for you to do."

"It would have been well had you formed that conclusion before bringing me from New York."

"I have only reached it within the last hour."

"Your change of mind was rather sudden."

"But fully warranted. I consider myself obligated to you to the extent of paying your expenses from and to the city, but no further."

"I shall be pleased to present you with that insignificant sum," said Orson Oxx, rising to his feet.

"I would prefer to pay you," returned Langdon, also rising.

"I will not accept it this evening, but possibly some other evening. Good-evening."

"Bon jour!"

And with the utmost suavity the two parted. Ay, they parted as friends, and yet they were mortal enemies! Each had parried the thrust of the other, but blows were soon to be delivered which would draw blood.

CHAPTER XIV.

A STARTLING CLEW.

A HALF-HOUR later, Orson Oxx was seated in the room of Brayton Russell, where the latter made his home after the burning of his own house.

The young man was greatly agitated, though during the long brisk walk home, he had to a great extent, gained the mastery of his feelings.

In accordance with his frank, honest nature, he told the detective of the incautious words he

dropped in the heat of his anger, which must have given the Winking Demon the very knowledge which should have been kept from him.

"I could have bitten my tongue off for the crime," he added, "within the next minute."

"It was an unfortunate oversight; I heard the words. I am sorry your indignation got the best of you, for they did much injury to me and you. Algol Langdon has discharged me from his service, and henceforth he knows that I am an enemy."

"I cannot forgive myself for the base betrayal of your confidence."

"Will you do me a favor?"

"I will do anything in my power for you."

"Never refer to it again; regrets are of no avail and I blame myself for telling you more than was necessary; what's done cannot be undone. You are safe from any interference from that scoundrel."

"I appreciate your kindness and am glad to give you my promise, though my regret is none the less keen; but I would have preferred a thousand times that he should have turned his machinations against me rather than make my beloved Ethel the victim of his fiendish enmity."

"He told you that he had sent his niece to Europe?"

"And I replied in substance that he lied."

"Are you sure of that?"

"Why not?"

"What more effective step could he take than to send her out of the country?"

"But would he have told me of it, when he knew he would not be believed?"

"That might have been one reason why he did so."

"How shall we determine?"

"Easily enough; I will go to New York to-morrow morning and find out. I will examine the lists of passengers on all the steamers, if there was more than one, which sailed to day."

"I see; you will be able to learn the truth or falsity of that statement."

"Without the least difficulty."

"Suppose you discover that he lied?"

"Then I shall return to Ardville and hunt for the trail here."

"But you spent a great deal of your time to-day, you say, in searching for a clew without success."

"True, but I may succeed to-morrow or the next day or the day after."

"And what am I to do in the mean time?"

"Keep quiet, but have your eyes and ears open."

"I cannot do that, when oppressed by such a dread as is weighing me down."

"Do not your duties require your presence at the structure which is being thrown across the river?"

"Yes, but I can place it in charge of my assistant for a few days."

"Very well; it will be a relief to your mind to busy yourself in the effort to find where the carriage came from in which she was taken away, and who the driver and two men were who acted the part of abductors."

"Depend upon it I shall not leave a stone unturned."

"He told me that his niece went in the company of a friend; if such was the fact, it must have been her aunt, the deaf sister of the Winking Demon."

"I know her; a vinegary old maid, Miss Jane Langdon."

"That knowledge will be of assistance to me."

"If I discover anything how shall I notify you?"

"Send me a telegram to the Metropolitan, directed to Orson Oxx."

After some further conversation, during which the two friends effected a perfect understanding, the detective bade Brayton Russell good-night, and went to his hotel.

The next forenoon, he was in New York prosecuting his search for Ethel Langdon and her aunt.

He made a full examination of all the passenger lists, not only of the steamers which had left the preceding day, but of those which were to sail during the following three days.

The missing lady had not taken passage on any one of them.

"Russell was right," said Orson Oxx to himself; "it was a deliberate falsification on the part of the Winking Demon."

Where then was Ethel Langdon?

He did not believe she was in New York.

Still debating the matter with himself he made his way back to the Metropolitan Hotel, where he intended to stay over night.

He was half-inclined to return at once to Ardville, but not until he had spent some time in considering the matter.

Just then he was entirely at sea.

At the hotel, he was surprised to find a telegram awaiting him.

It had arrived only a short time before.

It was dated Ardville and read as follows:

"Have just gained a most important clew; come at once; a crime which neither you nor I have dreamed of has been committed; there is not a moment to lose; come straight to me as fast as steam can bring you."

BRAYTON RUSSELL.

Orson Oxx lost no time in obeying the urgent summons.

He reached the station just in time to catch the outgoing train.

"What in the name of Heaven can Russell mean?" he repeated, again and again, as the railroad train thundered northward.

Ah! well might he ask himself the question!

Truth indeed, a crime has been committed of which neither the lover nor the sagacious detective had dreamed.

CHAPTER XV.

A FARCE THAT IS TOO COMMON.

WHILE Orson Oxx and Brayton Russell were holding their first friendly chat in a private room in the Delaware House, an extraordinary proceeding was under way at the Homestead.

The lovers had parted and Ethel Langdon was on the point of going to her apartment, when her uncle called her to the library.

She entered at once and the words of greeting were on her lips, when she recoiled as she observed two strangers seated there.

The Winking Demon laughed and beckoned her to enter.

"You need not be alarmed; these are my friends, Doctors Bell and Thompson."

The grave-looking gentlemen rose and bowed in a stately fashion and then sat down again.

Feeling no little curiosity as to what it all meant, our heroine accepted a seat near the door.

The visitors sat glum and silent.

To the astonishment of Ethel, her uncle began asking her a number of singular questions.

The maiden was in high spirits, for her cheeks were still flushed with the kisses of her lover imprinted only a few minutes before, and she was amused as well as mystified by the proceedings.

"Where have you been this evening, my dear?"

"In the village."

"With whom?"

"Old Mrs. Moseman."

"How is she?"

"Failing fast; I do not think she will be with us much longer," and the kind-hearted maiden breathed a gentle sigh.

"I suppose you did your best to entertain her?"

"Of course; I always do."

"In what way?"

"I read from the Bible and other books; cooked her a delicate meal and talked as best I could to interest her."

"That was very considerate in you; you are continually doing that sort of thing."

"I shall visit Mrs. Moseman every day, for there is no one with her and she must soon die."

And the gentle lady sighed again, while her beautiful face was clouded by the shadow of a sympathetic sorrow.

Suddenly she brightened up.

"I had quite a fright this evening," said she.

"Ah, what was that?"

"I was reading to Mrs. Moseman, when in a feeble voice, she reminded me that the curtain of the window was not drawn."

"What was there about that to startle you?"

"Any one could look through the window."

"And what if any one did?"

"I sprang up to draw the curtain across the panes, when I did catch sight of a man."

"Staring through the window?"

"Yes."

"What of it?"

"I suppose there was nothing terrible, but it was startling, when I took hold of the curtain, to see a dark figure standing outside with his hands in his pockets and staring straight at me."

At this point Doctors Bell and Thompson looked significantly at each other, and each began writing a few words rapidly with his lead-pencil in a note-book.

"Is that the only time you ever were frightened, my dear?"

"What an absurd question, uncle! I have no doubt I have been frightened scores of times, like every one else."

Again the pencils of the physicians moved swiftly.

"You are fond of visiting sick people, my dear?"

"We all ought to be fond of doing our duty; what would become of the unfortunate if they were not assisted by the more fortunate?"

"True, but don't you think it dangerous to be so far away from home late at night?"

"It would be if I were alone; you know I have an escort home every evening."

"Suppose he should fail to keep his appointment with you?"

"Brayton would not fail to do so," replied Ethel, with a snap of her fine eyes.

"Not willfully, of course, but he might be providentially prevented."

"Then I would stay all night with Mrs. Moseman."

Mr. Langdon turned his single eye upon the physicians, and saw they were taking notes and paying strict attention to the conversation.

"Don't you think it imprudent for a young lady like you to be away from home so much?"

Ethel, as may well be supposed, was amazed

at such questions, especially in the presence of two strangers to her.

One of these men wore eye-glasses, and was bald-headed, although he was less than fifty years old.

The other was still younger.

He was large of frame, bright-eyed, strong and wide awake.

They continually exchanged glances, and were almost incessantly jotting down notes.

"I wonder if uncle is out of his head," was the thought which came to Ethel.

She was somewhat indignant also.

She felt herself humiliated, and her pride rebelled.

"Uncle," said she, rising with dignity, "if you have anything further to ask of me, I will answer when we are alone."

"One moment," he said, speaking authoritatively.

The wondering lady resumed her seat.

"Dr. Bell," said the Winking Demon, nodding to the younger physician, "she is in your charge now."

CHAPTER XVI.

A CRIME SANCTIONED BY LAW.

BEFORE Ethel Langdon understood what was meant, Doctor Bell, the brisk young physician, stepped quickly across the floor and seized her hand.

"What do you mean, sir?" she demanded indignantly, attempting to free herself from his grasp.

But he retained his iron grip, shifting the forefinger of his hand, so that it rested on her wrist.

Then he thrust his head forward and peered into her countenance.

"Let me see your tongue!"

Quick as a flash, the wrathful Ethel brought her free hand against his face, with a force that caused him to see stars.

The delicate gloved hand was open, but an insulted lady can inflict punishment of that sort with much emphasis when she chooses.

The astounded doctor of medicine recoiled with a curse, while his companion laughed heartily over his discomfiture.

The maiden angered beyond control, caught hold of the knob of the door intending to rush from the room in which she had been humiliated.

At that instant, both physicians seized her.

Her uncle advanced for the same purpose, but his services were not required.

Ethel Langdon was terrified.

She screamed and struggled, and displayed more power of resistance than would have been thought possible in one of such a delicate frame; but she was helpless in the grasp of two strong men, who acted as if they were accustomed to overcoming such resistance. She was forced through the hall, out the door, and then half dragged and half carried along the path to the waiting carriage.

Algol Langdon was close behind them carrying her shawl and a bundle of clothing. The former was tossed over her head, so that her cries were almost smothered. Then she was thrust into the carriage, the two physicians quickly following and the door was banged shut. On the instant, the spirited horses were started down the lane at a fierce gallop. Reaching the highway, the driver kept them lashed to a high pace, until the sound of the wheels died out in the distance.

During all this time, Algol Langdon stood at his own gate straining his ear to catch the faint noise of the rapidly receding vehicle. So long as it was audible, he stirred no more than a block of stone. When, at last, the listening ear failed to hear the last evidence of his visitors, he turned about and walked to his house. On the way he chuckled and winked both eyes with much vigor.

"That settles her," he exclaimed with great exultation, when he was seated again in his house.

"Talk about beneficent laws," he added; "nothing equals those for the insane in this glorious Union. Here I've been tormenting myself for months as to how I was to keep Ethel from marrying that fool of a fellow."

"And all that time, I never dreamed that I had the remedy in my own hands."

"There's the law for the insane!"

"It must have been prepared for just such cases as this."

"I go to Brandon and see Doctors Bell and Thompson; I slip fifty dollars into the hands of each and tell 'em what I want."

"I have a ward, my niece, who is developing marked traits of insanity."

"It is necessary that she should be put in a lunatic asylum without delay."

"Any dilatoriness in doing so will be very culpable."

"She is liable to become violent any moment."

"She may leave her bed in the middle of the night and cut the throats of all in the house."

"True there's nobody here but Prosperity and me, but that would be more than enough, and she might then visit the tenant-house and run a muck through the village."

"Great heavens! What an awful danger! I shudder to think of it."

And the Winking Demon did really shudder as though he was frightened at something.

"I bring the doctors here," he resumed, running over the late events, "and arrange for a mental examination."

"To make it fair, Ethel is given no warning, but is brought in unawares, without any suspicion of what is intended."

"The examination has been arranged and I put the questions."

"She admits her tendency to run around nights and visit sick folks."

"None but crazy women do that."

"When she is there with old Mrs. Moseman, she imagines she sees some terrible monster, in the guise of a human being, peering into the window at her."

"That gives her dead away."

"I saw that settled her case with Doctors Bell and Thompson."

"But they are very careful; they do not wish to take any false step or make the slightest blunder in a matter of this kind."

"They are determined to err on the side of charity if they err at all."

"The doctor steps forward to examine her pulse and she resists violently."

"Then he makes a proper request to allow him to examine her tongue."

"The tongue of woman is her most important organ."

"It would help tell the right story to the doctor."

"How does Ethel answer his request?"

"She fetches him a whack across the face that nearly knocks him down."

"It was well done," said Langdon with a laugh, "but it cooked Ethel's goose."

"It dissipated what lingering doubts the physicians might have entertained respecting her insanity."

"I saw it and nodded for them to go ahead."

"They did so, and before morning she will be safely lodged within a lunatic asylum, where she will stay."

"For one of the beauties of this insane law, or rather law for the insane, is that it is the easiest thing in the world to place a person inside the walls of a lunatic asylum."

"But it is the hardest thing in the world to get him out."

"And therein were our legislators wise."

And The Demon blinked both eyes and chuckled again.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE WISDOM OF TWO HEADS.

ORSON OXX obeyed the telegram sent to him at the Metropolitan Hotel by Brayton Russell. He lost no time in making his way to Ardville, which was reached in the dusk of the early evening.

Young Russell was expecting him, and five minutes later, the two were holding a conference in the rooms of the young engineer.

"What is the clew you have gained?" asked the great detective, who naturally felt much curiosity to know.

"It came into my hands accidentally or providentially. You know I declared I meant to give my whole attention to this business."

"I rode out to the bridge this morning to make the necessary arrangements with my assistant."

"His name is Brandon and he lives in the town of Brandon, which was named after his grandfather."

"It is about ten miles away, and my assistant comes up on the train each morning, returning at night."

"While I was talking with him, he remarked that he did not feel very bright, as he had been up almost all night."

"He is a temperate man, but he said he had been out to the wedding of a friend and got back so late that he did not gain more than a couple of hours of sleep."

"That was all well enough, but in driving home, he and his brother collided with a carriage which was going at reckless speed."

"It was clearly the fault of the driver of the other vehicle, and Brandon was so indignant that he jumped out of his own carriage and challenged the driver to step down and take a thrashing."

"The driver was agreeable, and was on the point of doing so, when some one from within the carriage ordered him to go on at once."

"At the same moment the command was made, Brandon heard a young lady give utterance to a half-smothered shriek."

"The next moment the vehicle rattled up the road at a good pace, and Brandon finding his own carriage had not suffered anything, drove on home."

"Before he had told me that much, the suspicion flashed across me that my assistant had seen the carriage in which Ethel was taken away last night."

"There seems to be no room for doubt on that point."

"I questioned him closely."

"With what result?"

"My suspicions were confirmed."

"How?"

"Brandon said that he and his brother noticed the two horses were covered with foam, although the night was quite dark."

"That was proof they had come a good distance and had traveled at a high rate of speed."

"So it would seem. How far did you say Brandon is from here?"

"Ten miles, and this was a mile or two the other side."

"Were they making for a railroad station?"

"The asylum for the insane is less than a mile beyond where the collision of the carriages took place."

At that moment a great light broke in upon the detective.

This was the first time in his experience he had been called upon to investigate such a case.

But he knew something of the laws for the insane in the State of New York.

"They have taken her to the lunatic asylum," remarked the detective the next moment.

"That is my belief."

"There is where your affianced wife has been placed."

"I sent the dispatch to you as soon as satisfied of the facts and took the train for Brandon."

"What did you do?"

"I got out of the cars as soon as I arrived and took the next train back home."

"What did you mean by that?" asked Orson Oxx with a laugh.

"Because I was in such a state of mental excitement that more than likely I would have been taken for a lunatic myself. I was so enraged and felt such a powerful yearning to assault every one who had had a hand in this infernal business that, to confess the truth, I distrusted my own judgment."

"It was well you did so; more than likely you would have committed some blunder which would have made matters worse."

"I hardly see how that can be, for what can be worse than having Ethel locked up in a place where she is forced into the companionship of the vile, the wicked and the violently insane?"

"That is a distressing probability and one that I am bound to say has taken place again and again in this State."

"You believe there are many sane persons in our asylums?"

"Unfortunately there is no room for doubt. That which was intended as a beneficent institution is too frequently used as an engine of fraud, oppression, injustice and revenge."

"How?"

"The declaration of two reputable physicians is all that is required to consign any man to a living tomb."

"No other proceedings are required?"

"None at all; after such certificate is signed, then the unsuspecting victim can be forcibly carried off to the asylum."

"Is the intervention of no judge or officer necessary?"

"None at all."

"What a burning shame!" exclaimed the indignant engineer; "it is a blot on the legislation of this century. Are there any other States in the Union who place the liberty of their citizens in such peril?"

"In New Jersey the written declaration of a single physician is sufficient to send any one to a lunatic asylum."

"Incredible!"

"In that State a little more formality is required; the intervention of a Judge of the Common Pleas is necessary, but you can understand how natural it is for such an official to accept the certificate of a physician as all-sufficient without bothering himself to inquire further. In Pennsylvania they are more guarded, and in many of the States, the laws are just, beneficent and safe."

"But how easy to distort the intention of the law!"

"Ay, the medical profession contains its proper percentage of villains, who can be bought for a fee to serve the purposes of parties who wish to place relatives out of the way by sending them to a lunatic asylum."

"Such has been the course with Algol Langdon."

"Certainly; he has bribed two physicians to declare Ethel insane; thereupon most likely these same physicians have forced her into a carriage and she was lodged in an asylum hours ago."

"And we must get her out; how shall it be done?"

"That is not so easy as you would suppose."

"What are the difficulties in the way?"

"Unfortunately it is far easier to get into, than out of an asylum. There are sane persons who have been kept there for years before they could establish their sanity and secure their release."

Brayton Russell started as well he might.

But the detective lifted a great load from his mind the next minute by adding:

"In such cases it has generally happened that the alleged lunatic has had no active friends

outside nor inside the institution to interfere in his or her behalf."

"Therein lies Ethel's advantage."

"It does; she must be brought forth by a writ of *habeas corpus* which can be issued by a Judge of the Supreme Court."

"Such is the groundwork on which we must proceed to work."

CHAPTER XVIII.

ORSON OXX AND BRAYTON RUSSELL AGREE UPON A LINE OF ACTION.

THE laws for the insane, in most of the States of the Union, are a blot upon civilization.

Recent developments have shown that, as Orson Oxx remarked, that which was intended for one of the most beneficent institutions of the world, is often turned into an engine of persecution, wrong, cruelty, and revenge.

Insanity is one of the penalties of a high order of civilization.

The highest order of civilization is characterized by the highest development of crime.

Men and women, with not a taint of lunacy, have been imprisoned for years, simply because it was necessary that they should be declared of unsound mind, in order to secure property, or that the sinister designs of wicked persons might be carried out.

It did not require Orson Oxx and Brayton Russell many minutes to decide their course of action.

"I am a stranger in this section," said the Man of Iron, "and could not present any tenable grounds on which to ask a Judge of the Supreme Court to issue the writ that would bring Miss Langdon before him, for an examination that will satisfy him as to her mental condition."

"I am the proper party?"

"By all means. You are a widely known and respected citizen; you demonstrated that the other evening, when you made your successful appeal to the mob. No one else could have done as you did."

"I have endeavored to make my life such that all will respect me."

"Do you know any of the judges?"

The engineer reflected a moment.

"Judge Durham was an old friend of my father; was our representative in Congress, and secured my appointment as cadet to West Point."

"Brandon lies in his district, does it?"

"I judge so, because his home is in that town."

"He is the official you must see; go to him at once, and make a frank statement of the case."

"There ought to be nothing to prevent success."

"It would seem not, and yet I can only repeat what I said a moment ago, that it is much easier to get in an insane asylum than it is to get out, and you must not be too hopeful."

"If he should decline, I believe I would choke him," said the impetuous lover.

"You must learn to control yourself," replied Orson Oxx, with a warning shake of the head, "or you will be put into the asylum yourself."

"I think they would have a happy time in taking me there," said Russell, with a flash of the eye, which boded ill for the parties whom he had in mind.

"They would find means of doing so, should some of your particular friends deem it necessary."

"Possibly, but it's my opinion there would be difficulty in delivering the goods."

"As defiant spirits as you have been subdued, but there is little use to speculate upon that matter. The simple fact is, a person who is as sane as you or I has been hurried off to a lunatic asylum, and, its our, or rather your business, to get her out, for I do not see what further part I can play in the business."

"Your services may be needed."

"I have a feeling that there is something in this sad case, beyond what we suspect, and my services, whatever they may be worth, will be called into requisition very soon."

The detective spoke thoughtfully, for he felt the force of the strange utterances which escaped him.

"Shall I go to Brandon to-night?"

"What time can you reach there?"

The engineer consulted a time-table of the railroad and found that there would be no train until eleven o'clock.

"By the time you can reach the house of Judge Durham, he will be in bed. More than likely it will prejudice the case to disturb his slumbers."

"I will wait then until to-morrow."

"You need the assistance of a competent lawyer."

"The counsel of the company which is building the bridge I am superintending, lives there."

"What is his name?"

"Mr. Maggiore; he's an excellent lawyer too."

"And a good friend of yours?"

"We are not intimate, but he is trustworthy in every respect."

"Take the night train to Brandon; go to the

hotel and see him as early as possible next morning."

"And you?"

"I have not settled what I will do."

"I may find it necessary to communicate with you."

"That is scarcely possible, for a day or two at least; but, in case you wish to do so send a dispatch as before."

Orson Oxx did not intend to leave Ardville for some time to come.

He had another matter which he wished to look after, while waiting the result of the mission of the engineer.

He would have been glad to take Brayton Russell into his confidence, but, after what had taken place a short time before, nothing in the world would have induced him to do so.

"It is not always the lack of confidence which brings disaster in this world," was his belief, "but rather because there is too much of it."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE WRIT OF HABEAS CORPUS.

JUDGE DURHAM is one of the most upright and respected officials who have honored the Supreme Bench of the Empire State.

He is about three-score years of age, and in the prime of his mental strength.

He was sitting in his luxurious library, reading the morning paper, by the aid of his golden spectacles, when two visitors were ushered in.

His urbanity and kind disposition rendered him a favorite with the members of the bar, and when he found that one of his callers was Lawyer Maggiore, he laid aside his paper and greeted him with great cordiality.

He did not recognize Brayton Russell until his name was pronounced, when he looked at him keenly.

"Why, Brayton, my dear boy, is that you?" he asked with much warmth, rising to his feet and shaking him heartily by the hand.

The engineer thanked the judge, and complimented him on his appearance.

"He's one of my boys," said the judge, turning to Mr. Maggiore; "his father was my old and valued friend, and it was my pleasure to help Brayton to West Point."

"I shall never forget your many kindnesses to my parents as well as to myself," said Russell.

Then followed several minutes' exchange of pleasant words and mutual inquiries, during which the lawyer was a listener.

When a lull came, the judge asked whether he could render them any service.

Then it was that Lawyer Maggiore stated the business which had brought him and his client there.

Judge Durham listened attentively, and showed great interest in what was told him.

"It is strange," said he, "how it is that the best and most Christianlike charity may be turned into an instrument of wrong. Yours is not the first case of the kind in which I have felt it my duty to interfere."

"Have you found many really sane persons shut up in the asylums?" inquired Mr. Maggiore.

"More than there ought to be found; with the safeguards thrown around the commitments of such unfortunates, there never should be a mistake made."

"May I ask what proportion of those whose circumstances have been investigated by yourself are discovered to be wrongly committed?"

The question was asked by the counselor.

"Probably a fourth," was the astonishing answer, "and I am grieved to confess it. It shows a most lamentable carelessness on the part of the physicians making the examination."

"And sometimes a worse motive."

"Let us hope not," the judge hastened to say; "who were the medical gentlemen employed in this case of yours?"

"Of that we have no knowledge."

"That is unfortunate; when was she committed to the Brandon asylum?"

"Night before last."

The judge asked several other questions, so as to inform himself fully and then seemed to hesitate.

He had an acquaintance with Algol Langdon and was loth to believe he would lend himself to anything wrong.

He thought the fact that the lady in the case was the affianced of his young friend possibly might shut his eyes to a painful truth.

But Mr. Maggiore insisted, Brayton Russell adding some vigorous and earnest words.

Finally the judge yielded, and wheeling around to his desk spent several minutes in preparing the important paper.

"I have made it returnable next Monday," explained the official as he passed it over to the lawyer. "It is directed to Dr. Cahn Auffmordt, Superintendent of Brandon Lunatic Asylum, and requires him to appear before me in Chambers next Monday morning at ten o'clock, with the person of Miss Ethel Langdon, that the question of her sanity may be fully inquired into."

This was the utmost that could be asked and the callers thanking the judge, bade him good-morning.

"When shall it be served on the superintendent?" asked Brayton Russell, as they reached the outside.

"At once; we will go directly there; I will order out my carriage and we'll drive over in less than half an hour."

It was accordingly so done.

Turning into a winding road that led through a small stretch of woods, the gentlemen caught sight of Brandon Asylum.

It was a handsome building of rough, hewn stone, surrounded by pleasant grounds and shade-trees.

It was capable of accommodating one hundred and fifty patients and bore the reputation of being an excellent institution.

Mr. Maggiore drove his horse to the massive stone steps in front, and, stepping out, followed by his client, gave his animal in charge of an attendant who immediately presented himself.

The visitors looked up at the windows, all of which were crossed with strong bars of iron.

They could hear a few shouts and cries at intervals which showed that among the patients were several who were violent.

Everything, however, had a neat and cleanly appearance and this was observable, when they rung the bell, and were ushered through the broad hall with the waxed floor, to the office of the superintendent.

They had but a few minutes to wait when Superintendent Auffmordt appeared and greeted them with much effusiveness.

After the exchanges of some scant courtesy, Mr. Maggiore served the writ upon the official.

CHAPTER XX.

AN UNEXPECTED SET-BACK.

DR. CAHN AUFFMORDT, Superintendent of Brandon Lunatic Asylum, was a portly man, with a pleasant face and keen gray eye.

All three who were in the office while the writ of *habeas corpus* was being read remained standing.

As soon as the superintendent caught the meaning of the legal paper he began smiling, and, when it was finished, his face was illumined by a broad grin.

Brayton Russell was angered, for he could not see any justification of levity in such a serious matter.

When Lawyer Maggiore had finished reading the document, he carefully refolded it, placed it in his pocket, and said:

"I have done my duty."

He then looked at Mr. Auffmordt to hear what remark he had to make.

The official, still smiling, made remark:

"That is all very well, gentlemen, but there is a little difficulty in the way of obeying that summons."

"What is that?"

"The party named in the writ is not, and never has been, an inmate of the Brandon Asylum."

"WHAT?"

Lawyer and client uttered the exclamation together.

They were astounded.

They had never dreamed of such an answer to the writ.

Brayton Russell believed the superintendent was falsifying, and was on the point of making some hasty remark, when he restrained himself.

The matter was in the hands of his lawyer.

The indignant lover, therefore, held his peace and listened to his legal friend.

Mr. Maggiore hastily took out his summons again and looked at the name of the lady.

"It is Ethel Langdon," he said; "are you sure, doctor, that you have not made a mistake?"

He shook his head, still smiling.

"There is no mistake; I heard the name distinctly; I repeat there is not now, and never has been, a person in Brandon Lunatic Asylum by that name."

"Then they must have brought her here under an assumed name," suggested Russell.

The superintendent again shook his head.

"You say this lady was sent to the asylum within the past two days?"

Both gentlemen nodded to signify that such was the fact.

"The last patient we received was ten days ago, and it was not a lady, either. Our institution is crowded."

"Have you refused any within a week?"

"No, sir."

Brayton Russell looked into the face of his legal friend.

"Can it be possible he is telling the truth?" was the question which these looks plainly asked.

And the reply of Mr. Maggiore was as manifest on his countenance without his opening his lips.

"This is too serious a matter for him to attempt deception; he must make return to this writ that it may be traversed, and, if he does so untruthfully, the consequences will be anything but agreeable to him."

Dr. Auffmordt read the doubt in their faces, but his dignity would not permit him to notice it by words.

The smile had not departed yet, and he said

in a voice so low and soothing that it might be thought he was addressing one of his own patients:

"I will be pleased to show you through our institution, from top to bottom; I like all to see its workings."

"We're obliged to you," replied the lawyer, "we may avail ourselves of your kindness some other day."

The two visitors saluted the superintendent and passed out.

"That's a complete set-back!" exclaimed Russell, after they had entered the carriage and started home.

"It is a blow directly between the eyes," was the characteristic comment of the lawyer.

"Do you not think it possible he lied to us?"

"Of course it is possible for any person to lie, but there is not the slightest probability that he has done so. Dr. Auffmordt has held that position too long not to know the punishment he would receive for contempt of court."

"It follows then that Miss Langdon was not taken to that retreat, when we, or at least I, was absolutely certain of it. A detective whom I employed was just as positive as I."

"The American detective is fallible," was the somewhat superfluous observation of the lawyer.

The conversation homeward developed nothing as to the future course of the parties.

Mr. Maggiore was of the opinion that Mr. Langdon had really sent his niece to Europe, employing means which deceived the detective.

"How could your wonderfully sagacious friend tell whether 'Mrs. Jones and Daughter,' on the register, stands for those persons or whether for Mrs. Fitzgibbons and her offspring?"

"He can't tell; I believe Ethel is out on the ocean this very hour," was the desperate exclamation of the lover; "and I'll follow her to the ends of the earth."

Brayton Russell hastened back to Ardville ready for any wild scheme.

"Everything goes wrong," he muttered savagely. "Orson Oxx ought to be at command. Confound him! he said he felt as though his services would be needed and yet he don't think the time will come for several days; what sort of a fellow is he? how does he know when the time will come? He tells me to telegraph him at the Metropolitan, but who shall say when and where it will reach him?"

Nevertheless and all the same Orson Oxx at that moment was almost within the sound of Brayton Russell's voice.

And the detective was getting in his work in an exceedingly effective manner.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE QUEEN OF THE CANNIBAL ISLANDS.

ONE autumn evening, not long ago, Ethel Langdon, an enchanting young lady, was at her home with her uncle. She was in the enjoyment of high health and her mental powers were remarkably bright. The sky wore a radiant hue to her and all the future was glowing with hope and happiness.

Within the succeeding twelve hours she was lodged in a lunatic asylum!

The why and wherefore of this extraordinary outrage has already been outlined to the reader.

Algol Langdon, otherwise known as the Winking Demon, believed himself in a peculiar and dangerous situation. None knew better than he that if his niece married before reaching her majority, he would be a ruined man. If the marriage could be prevented or deferred until after that time, he would be left in the possession of immense wealth and luxury. And, as the only means of obstructing the marriage, he had the charming lady consigned to a lunatic asylum, which act he took care to have done in legal form; that was necessary for his own future safety. And, also, it was the easiest course to take.

He gave Doctors Bell and Thompson fifty dollars apiece for their certificate that Miss Ethel Langdon was of unsound mind. He agreed to pay each of them one hundred dollars more, after she had been safely placed in an institution for the insane. He pledged himself further to give each five hundred dollars apiece should she be kept there until she reached the age of twenty-one years.

Thus he made it quite an object for these practitioners to carry out his wishes in every respect.

They did so to the extent of their ability.

Of the long night-ride, the maiden retained only a dim recollection, like that of some grisly phantasm of the brain.

She had resisted and fought with all the desperation at her command, but it was of no avail against two powerful men.

The drug which was forcibly applied to her nostrils on a handkerchief gradually robbed her of her senses.

But there were moments during that long, dreadful ride, when she partly awakened to a sense of her awful position.

Then it was she would cry out and struggle to free herself from the iron grasp of her enemies.

Finally she sunk into a state of unconscious-

ness, from which she did not rally for many hours, though faint opium-like fancies continually struggled through her tortured brain.

When at last she came to herself it was broad daylight.

The clear autumn sun was shining brightly.

She looked about her and found she was lying on a couch in a moderate-sized apartment.

It was neatly furnished with carpet, double bed, bureau, mirrors and all conveniences of modern life.

Looking across the room she observed that the windows were crossed by strong bars of iron.

She knew she was in a lunatic asylum.

Raising her head, she became sensible of a dull heavy feeling, which she was well aware was the result of the drug from which she was suffering.

"How dare my uncle do such a thing as this?" she muttered, assuming a sitting position and pressing her hands to her forehead.

"They dare do anything."

The words were spoken in a sharp, feminine voice and startled Ethel, who turned her head quickly to learn whence they came.

She had not noticed until that moment, that there was another person in the room.

A lady who appeared several years older than herself, was sitting motionless in a corner, reading a volume.

Her face was bright and pleasing, and her dark eyes especially had a keen, wide-awake appearance, which would have impressed any one.

As the gaze of the two ladies met, the one who had been reading asked:

"What is your name, please?"

"Ethel Langdon."

"That's a pretty name; Ethel, Ethel, Ethel—I like that."

"Yes, I am fond of it," said our heroine with a smile, for she was in doubt whether this lady was of sound mind or not; "will you tell me yours, if you please?"

"Hannah Hahlo, how do you like it?"

"It is a good, plain English name; how long have you been in the asylum?"

"Four years, which is just four years longer than they had any right to place me here."

Hannah rose, picked up her chair and set it down beside the lounge on which Ethel was sitting.

"What made them bring you here?" asked the older occupant, stroking the luxuriant hair of Ethel with evident admiration.

"I was sent here by an enemy to get me out of the way."

"You don't look to me as though your mind is affected in the least," said Hannah sympathizingly; "I don't believe it is any more than mine."

Ethel looked searchingly in the face of the young woman; she saw no evidence of an impaired mind there.

"She, too, is the victim of persecution," was the conclusion of Ethel, who took the hand of the lady in her own.

"No, my friend, I was placed here by bad men, because they wanted me out of the way."

"It was the same with me. My father was determined I should marry a man double my age—a man whom I abominated. I was engaged to a noble young person who died. My heart was buried with him, and I told father so; but he would not yield. When I had tried prayers and entreaties, I put my foot down and told him I would die before I would consent to become the wife of such a Caliban. You behold the consequence."

The heart of Ethel was touched.

Had not she an affianced lover, and could she not appreciate the infinite sorrow and woe that must have wrung that poor heart when the beloved of her soul was placed away in the grave?

"I cannot understand how it is a person is allowed to put another in the asylum like this," said Hannah, "when the mind of one party is as sound as that of the other."

"Nor do I. I was drugged when I was brought here. Were you present?"

"Of course; it was nearly daylight, and I was up and dressed when the matron knocked on the door. I opened it and she and the superintendent were supporting you, one on each arm."

"What did they do with me?"

"You were carried, very gently I am bound to say, and placed on the lounge. Then the superintendent went out and the matron and I removed your outer clothing. Your face was bathed, your splendid hair dressed and everything possible was done for you."

"I am very grateful to you for your kindness, and am glad that I have you for a room mate."

"But I have a secret to tell you," suddenly whispered Hannah, leaning forward and looking sharply into the face of Ethel; "promise me you will not tell it."

"Of course I will guard it sacredly."

"I gave you my name as Hannah Hahlo, but that is not who I am."

"Indeed! Who are you then?"

"You won't tell?"

"I have given you my promise."

"I am the queen of the Cannibal Islands, yes, the queen of the Cannibal Islands!"

Ethel saw on the instant that the woman who was in the room with her was a lunatic beyond question.

The light of her bright, dark eyes was the fire of insanity.

"They've put you in here," she added, in excitement, "so as to make you queen instead of me; I know it because you are so beautiful; but they sha'n't. I knew you were coming, and I got ready. I am going to kill you as quick as lightning!"

And to the horror of Ethel Langdon, the lunatic drew a glittering dagger from beneath her apron!

CHAPTER XXII.

ETHEL LANGDON'S COMPANION.

THERE could be no doubt that Ethel Langdon, who was imprisoned in a lunatic asylum, was of perfectly sound mind.

It was equally certain that her room-mate was a violent lunatic with murderous propensities.

"They've put you in here," she repeated, "so as to make you queen instead of me; I know it because you are so beautiful, but they sha'n't; I knew you were coming and I got ready; I am going to kill you as quick as lightning!"

While these frightful words were in the mouth of the fierce woman, she drew from beneath her apron a genuine Italian dagger, keen, and gleaming.

Her small hand closed upon it with rigid vigor and her whole frame glowed and quivered with passion.

Her eyes seemed to emit fire as she breathed quick and hard, like a panting wild beast.

Ethel Langdon perceived her awful peril on the instant.

There seemed no escape from her savage room-mate.

The door was locked and the two windows were barred.

If she should shriek for help, the lunatic could complete her appalling work long before the most fleet-footed friend could rush to her assistance.

More than likely her cries would receive no attention even if heard, for there was scarcely an hour, when shouts, screams and shrieks did not resound from some part of the institution.

It would be equally futile for the delicate Ethel to attempt to defend herself against her assailant.

The latter, fired and inflamed by her overpowering frenzy, possessed a strength for the time tenfold greater than was hers under other circumstances.

There was but the single method of combating the wild woman.

That was setting brain against brain.

In such a contest, Ethel Langdon had a prospect of winning.

Without stirring from the lounge on which she was seated, she suppressed all exhibitions of excitement or alarm and forced herself to smile.

"And so you are a queen," she repeated, with a look of admiration; "what a beautiful queen you make!"

"Do you think so?" asked the other with a simpering smile, that was in grotesque contrast to her fearful passion of a moment before.

"You are a splendid, a magnificent queen!" exclaimed Ethel, raising her hands, as if unable to express her unbounded delight; "let me see you walk."

The poor creature sprang up and began parading back and forth across the room.

She walked fast, flitting her dress from side to side and peeping first over one shoulder and then over the other, while she perked her lips with childish pleasure.

All this time one of the hands which were crossed in front held the frightful Italian dagger that she meant to plunge into the heart of the gentle Ethel but a moment before.

Our heroine knew enough of the peculiarities of insane people to understand that so long as she could keep the mind of the other diverted, she would be safe from harm.

But how long could she do so?

This might last a few minutes only.

When would the matron or attendant appear?

It might not be for an hour or so.

But Ethel could only hope and pray, while she exerted herself to keep the mind of the lunatic from the crime she had contemplated.

Ethel used all the adjectives she could to express her overwhelming admiration of the queen who was parading up and down the apartment, and the latter seemed in danger of being overcome for the time by her self-pride.

Suddenly she stopped and glared upon Ethel like a crouching tigress.

"You are more beautiful than I; you have come here to dethrone me; you shall not do it, for I will kill you!"

"How can you assert you are not more beautiful than I? You ought to be ashamed of saying anything like that."

"No, I ain't, for it is the truth."

And the envious queen tightened her grasp on

the weapon once more and began a catlike approach toward her victim.

"Now," said Ethel, whose heart was throbbing fast, though she forced herself to smile, "if you want to put me to death, you have the right as queen to do so; but, before you slay me, I would like to have the question settled whether you are not a much more beautiful ruler than I."

"Do you deny it?"

"I do."

"You lie!"

"You are mistaken."

"How shall we decide?"

"Wait till the matron comes; we will leave it to her."

The lunatic paused, partly convinced but still suspicious.

Disordered as was her brain, she seemed to understand that there was a trick in contemplation.

As may be supposed, Ethel Langdon listened with an intensity of anguish beyond imagination for the sound of the approaching steps along the hall.

Great Heaven! to imprison an innocent right-minded person like herself in a room with a wild creature that she might be murdered in the most dreadful manner!

"She will come," thought the horrified Ethel, "and find my body bleeding and dead on the floor."

"That was why uncle Algol sent me here."

The crazy woman hesitated but a minute, when the flame of an inconceivable fury shone again in her eye.

She breathed fast and hard, her muscles tightened painfully, and she concentrated her strength for the purpose of slaying the helpless lady before her.

"No, no, no," she muttered, through her closed teeth, while her fiery eyes seemed to burn through the very brain of the cowering Ethel. "If we should wait till she came, she would say you were the more beautiful; then they would make you queen, and then they would cast me in prison; that shall never be, for I am queen; you shall die!"

Poor Ethel felt she had exhausted all her resources.

She could do nothing more.

She folded her arms, bowed her head, and calmly awaited the stroke that should end it all.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A TIMELY CALL.

AT this critical moment a key was heard to turn in the lock of the door.

The lunatic with one foot advanced like an athlete on the point of starting on a desperate run, checked herself, and listened.

A second was enough. She knew the attendant was coming.

With surprising deftness, she hid the weapon in her pocket, and her face assumed an expression of beaming kindness and love, the very opposite of the baleful wrath that blazed there the instant before.

She shook her finger warningly at Ethel.

"Not a word," she said, in a husky whisper, "or I will kill you! Remember!"

Ethel had risen to her feet, but she made no answer.

The door was shoved inward, and Mrs. Julliard, the matron and attendant, entered, bearing a tray before her, upon which was placed the breakfast intended for the two inmates of the room.

She set it on a stand directly beside her, turned about, dexterously locked the door behind her, and then, with an expansive smile, greeted the two.

"Good-morning! How is the queen this morning, and how are you, Miss Langdon?"

It was no time to mince words or dally, when her life was in a peril, and Ethel said:

"Why did you place me in this room with this person?"

"Why, what objection can you have? Is she not a quiet, well-disposed person?"

"Of course I am," struck in the patient, all smiles and gentleness. "The Queen of the Cannibal Islands is always gentle and loving; this poor lady's nerves must have been disturbed by some trouble."

"That woman," said Ethel, indicating the last speaker, while she fixed her eyes upon the matron, "has a dagger in her pocket; she had drawn it, and was in the very act of leaping upon me, and burying the weapon in my heart, when you turned the key in the door; then she hastily put away the dagger, meaning to wait until you went out before she would kill me."

"Mercy goodness! you surprise me! are you sure you are not mistaken?" asked the matron, looking from one to the other in a bewildered fashion.

"I would not be very likely to be mistaken on such a matter as that," replied Ethel scornfully; "suppose you examine her pocket for yourself."

"Queen," said the matron sternly, "turn the pocket of your dress wrong side out; do so instantly!"

Under these sharp orders, the patient obeyed and the dagger dropped upon the floor.

Nothing could surpass the look of amazement on the face of the woman.

Recalling a step or so, she looked down upon the shining weapon, as though it was a cobra gathering itself for its blow.

"That's the most wonderful thing I ever heard of," she murmured, as if speaking to herself; "where could it have come from?—ah, I know!" she suddenly added, looking up with a glowing face.

"From where?"

"I had forgotten; Sir Walter Raleigh climbed up to the window and reached it through the bars to me; strange that it slipped my mind."

"When Sir Walter Raleigh calls for it, send him to me," said the matron, stepping across the floor and picking up the weapon.

The patient smiled benignantly and assured the woman that Sir Walter should be duly informed.

"I am sorry this thing has happened," said Mrs. Julliard to Ethel; "will you please step outside into the hall and wait for me?"

She accompanied the request by inserting the key and unlocking the door.

As may be supposed, Ethel Langdon was quick to avail herself of the permission.

The next minute, she stood in the long narrow hall on the outside, and was looking down the passageway to the barred window at the other end.

Ethel, during her brief stay in this asylum, had learned a few not unimportant facts.

She was on the third floor of the institution.

On this third floor, two rows of rooms extended the whole length, the hall passing between.

Thus the door of each of the twenty rooms opened into the hall, light in every case being admitted from the windows connected with the outside.

A winding stairs at each end of the hall, led down to the second floor, where, as she supposed, the same arrangement was duplicated.

When Ethel Langdon found herself in this long narrow passage, the floor of which shone as though it was waxed, she asked herself whether it was not possible to escape from the building, before the appearance of the matron.

The thought was a startling one and she stood a minute irresolute.

She could hear the woman talking with the alleged queen, as though she was likely to remain several minutes.

"Is it possible the way is open when I reach the next floor?" she asked herself; "will they not be certain to stop me before I can get to the outside?"

At that instant, the door behind her was drawn inward and Mrs. Julliard came out with the tray before her, enough of the food being left upon it to furnish Ethel with her morning meal.

"I am glad you did not try to run away," said she moving along the hall; "it will secure you better treatment, if you show an appreciation of our indulgence. Besides, it would not have done you any good, for you would have been confronted by a dozen locks before you could have reached the outside of the gates. We will stop here."

They had reached a point about half way along the hall, when the matron stopped, unlocked a door and signified to Ethel that she should enter.

The latter did so, followed by the official, who sat down her tray as before, after which, for purposes of security, the door was fastened on the inside.

Ethel looked about her and found that she had entered precisely such a room as was vacated a few minutes before.

It was furnished in the same manner, the only difference being the lady had no room-mate.

"I am sorry that you were so frightened," said Mrs. Julliard, "but we have so many, that we are obliged to crowd our patients more than is pleasant to them or us."

"Do you have any who are sane?" asked Ethel, looking steadily at her.

"They all think they are," said the lady, who was so accustomed to handle lunatics, that she seemed to understand every mood. "Now, you doubtless have the same opinion of yourself and I am quite sure you will be entirely well in a few days."

Ethel reflected that it was useless to attempt any argument with this woman, who must have heard the most ingenious pleas that the human mind can frame.

"Have I no luggage?" was the somewhat practical question of the patient.

"A bundle of clothes was brought with you and Dr. Julliard, the superintendent, will see that you are supplied with everything you can need. He was instructed to do so by your uncle."

"Have I the liberty to write letters to my friends?"

"Most certainly."

"I would like to do so."

"While you are partaking of your breakfast, I will bring you pens, ink and paper."

CHAPTER XXIV.

A NEW LINE OF CAMPAIGN IS ADOPTED.

It would seem that when Orson Oxx and Brayton Russell parted from each other, the great detective would have been authorized in considering the case closed, so far as he was concerned.

But, as he had intimated, he had a feeling that the writ of *habeas corpus* would not terminate the extraordinary business.

While all the indications pointed that way, yet it seemed improbable that such a sordid villain as the Winking Demon, would engage in a plot that could be overthrown with such ease.

But the departure of the engineer from Ardville, left the Man of Iron with considerable leisure on his hand and he prepared to utilize it.

He had become convinced beyond all possibility of doubt, that Algol Langdon was the incendiary who had caused such death, ruin and consternation in Ardville for the past few months.

He believed he had no accomplice, though he was not certain on the point.

While Brayton Russell was seeking to rescue his beloved, the officer gave his attention to the uncle.

He moved around through the day, now and then making a guarded inquiry and obtaining the "lay of the land," as the expression goes.

The night, unlike the previous one, was clear and starlight, so that a pair of keen eyes could discern objects for a considerable distance.

Orson Oxx, with the marvelous instinct for which he was celebrated, decided in his own mind, the course which the incendiary took in returning to his home.

He could not fix upon the route used in entering the village, for that was likely to be varied as often as possible.

The Homestead, as it was called, was a third of a mile from the village and could be approached from the main highway, or by a shorter path across the fields, which passed through a small patch of woods.

This latter course undoubtedly was the one taken by the fire-bug in his flight.

Whatever traces he might leave would not awaken suspicion, for it was a regular route frequently traveled.

But, from some information picked up, it would seem that two, if not three, incendiaries were concerned.

However that might be, Algol Langdon, the Winking Demon, was the principal one and Orson Oxx was resolved to take him in the very act.

From some points also picked up, Oxx learned that Langdon was accustomed to spend an evening at one of the hotels, where he would stay until quite late, drinking considerably, when he started homeward, or at least was believed to do so.

Several times the fire broke out within half an hour after his departure.

But Orson Oxx was not the only one in Ardville, who held the slightest suspicion against Algol Langdon.

In the dusk of the early evening, after finishing his meal, Orson Oxx was seated in the bar-room of the Ardville House, listening to the conversation of the *habitués* of the place and waiting for the Winking Demon to appear.

The detective was disguised, so that none of his friends would have suspected his identity.

Suddenly Algol Langdon came in and took a drink at the bar, without inviting any one else, though he addressed several.

Directly behind him, entered Brayton Russell.

One look at his face showed that something unusual had taken place.

He looked keenly about the room as if searching for some one.

When his eyes rested unsuspiciously upon Orson Oxx, the latter made him a sign.

No one else noticed it, but Brayton Russell "caught on" at once, and immediately turned about and went up-stairs.

A minute later, the detective followed.

Two minutes after, the two were seated together discussing the situation in low voices.

Orson Oxx dropped no hint about the knowledge he had obtained of the incendiary proclivities of the Winking Demon.

Brayton Russell lost no time in telling what had happened to himself and lawyer Maggiore.

The detective was astonished.

"What is your belief?" asked Russell.

"I believe it was she in the carriage, and that compels another theory altogether," said the detective.

"Are you sure that they did not drug her, put her on the cars at some remote station, then hurry her away to New York and place her on a steamer, under an assumed name?"

"My dear boy, there is nothing certain in this world, except the uncertainty of all things. I do not believe that was done."

"Then they have taken her to the city where she is kept in confinement."

"I do not think so; that might answer as a temporary resort, but Ethel is not a child who can be handled at will in such fashion as that would imply."

"Such things have been done; the papers con-

tain many an account of persons who disappear and are never heard of again."

"Depend upon it your betrothed will be heard of again, before your hair turns gray."

"What is your theory?"

"That she has been taken to another than the Brandon lunatic asylum; and she is in such an institution at this moment."

"But where?"

"That is the problem for us to solve; is the crop of asylums very plenty in this part of the Empire State?"

"I never have had the occasion to investigate, but I judge there are plenty of them."

"I believe that Langdon, for the purpose of greater safety, has taken her to some private asylum, where he believes we would not be likely to hunt for her?"

"That is my theory also."

"Then let us set to work upon it without delay."

CHAPTER XXV.

ORSON OXX AND THE FIRE-BUG.

"First of all," said Orson Oxx, "the plan is very simple."

"Explain."

"The carriage which your assistant saw late at night was as I have said the one for which we are hunting."

"I agree with you."

"Follow that."

"Beginning at the point where it was seen by Mr. Brandon?"

"As near as possible."

"Will you go with me?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I shall follow a different line."

"Will we not do better in company?"

"I am convinced we will not."

"How shall I communicate with you?"

"It is not likely there will be any opportunity for several days."

"You said the same thing last night."

"Direct to the Metropolitan Hotel, as before."

"Do you expect to be there?"

"I cannot say," replied the detective with a laugh; "if I am not I will send for the message to-morrow evening."

"When shall I start?"

"As you have but a few days at your command, I would leave Ardville this evening; you will have that much less to do to-morrow."

The detective was anxious to get rid of his friend.

"All right; good-by," was the hopeful response of the engineer, who sprung to his feet, shook the hand of his friend, and passed out.

Giving him time to leave the house, Orson Oxx descended to the bar-room.

It was his purpose to pipe the Winking Demon.

He was annoyed to find on reaching the drinking-room, that, brief as was the time he had been up-stairs, the Winking Demon had departed.

But a careful inquiry gave him the information that he had probably gone to the Delaware House.

Thither Orson Oxx followed.

When he entered the bar-room of that inn, where he himself had met with such a narrow escape from death, he was pleased to find Algol Langdon was there, talking with several of the villagers.

Although the Winking Demon was fully aware of his unpopularity, yet great deference was shown him on account of his wealth.

Men who abominated the tyrant were as obsequious in his presence as though he was a judge with the power of sentencing them to the penitentiary.

Orson Oxx, who looked very much like a cattle-drover, invited the company to drink.

None accepted more eagerly than Algol Langdon.

The Man of Iron dextrously poured the fiery liquor outside of his throat, as he had done on more than one previous occasion.

Being in a liberal mood, he treated the crowd several times, his purpose being to get Algol Langdon under the influence of liquor.

Alcohol leads a man to do that which he would do when sober, if he only had the courage.

In other words, a man acts out his natural self.

Orson Oxx believed that if Langdon could be made to swallow several drinks, he would be more likely to set fire to some building than he would if possessing unclouded brain.

The history of the incendiarism for the past few months showed that, as a rule, several days intervened between each attempt.

To his dismay, however, Orson Oxx discovered that his man was only touching his lips to the liquor.

Each time he set down the glass without any appreciable diminution of the contents.

"He is too sharp to be caught," was the conclusion of Oxx.

Nevertheless the detective feigned partial inebriety himself, and, talking pretty thickly, he staggered out of the door, went down the steps

and halted as soon as he reached the shadow of a group of trees.

Then he became all attention. He was determined to watch the Winking Demon.

The night was crisp and cold, and, though several persons came out and went in, yet Algol Langdon was not among them.

But Orson Oxx was not impatient. He had learned patience long before.

About ten o'clock a dark figure came down the steps. The individual was tall and walked with a slight limp.

"That's my man!"

He turned to the right and walked by the spot where the detective was crouching without suspecting his presence.

Oxx kept his eye on him until he vanished in the gloom.

Even then Orson did not stir from his place.

"He will come back; that is only a blind."

The detective was right. At the end of fifteen minutes the keen senses of hearing of the Man of Iron apprised him that some one was approaching from the point toward which the Winking Demon had passed.

As the figure loomed up in the darkness, one glance was enough to prove it was the same individual.

Directly opposite Orson Oxx, he stopped.

He stood silent and watchful several minutes.

"He is reconnoitering," was the conclusion of the detective.

The hour was so late that few of the villagers were stirring.

Suddenly some one came down the steps of the Delaware House and started up the road toward where the Demon stood.

The scoundrel quietly stepped back among the trees behind him.

As he did so, he came within a hair's breadth of bumping against Orson, who never escaped detection by a narrower chance.

As soon as the stranger vanished, Langdon began moving toward the village, turning to the right, however, so as to leave the road, and make his way through the shrubbery.

He seemed to pass through this with the stealth and skill of an Apache Indian.

With a horror which it would be difficult to describe, Orson Oxx saw he was making his way toward the humble little cottage in which dwelt Mrs. Mesman.

Not content with taking away the best nurse in the world from the poor old invalid, the wretch was about to set fire to the building, in which she could linger but a few days longer at the most!

Orson approached as close as possible and then crouched down to leap upon the villain.

"It will not do to allow the fire to get started," he thought, "for the shock will kill the old lady."

Just then a bright point appeared. It was at the rear of the building, and the quickness with which the flame was kindled showed that the wretch understood the art of incendiarism to perfection.

Orson Oxx attempted to creep forward, but, slight as was the noise he made, he was heard, and then Algol Langdon sprung up and bounded away like a deer.

Orson Oxx leaped upon the fire, scattered the embers with a few vigorous kicks and then went for the fire bug.

He could just catch sight of the shadowy figure, which got over the ground with amazing speed.

Orson Oxx did not shout or fire his pistol, for he wished to avoid an alarm, which might result in placing him at the mercy of the mob again.

Confident he could catch the scoundrel, the matchless athlete bent all his energies toward doing so.

The Winking Demon must have felt he was in a serious dilemma, for, despite all the extraordinary efforts he put forth, his pursuer was steadily gaining upon him.

A very brief time carried them beyond the confines of the village, and the fire-bug sped like a frightened hound across the fields toward his own home.

And all the time Orson Oxx was silently, grimly and surely overhauling him.

CHAPTER XXVI.

BY THE SKIN OF HIS TEETH.

ORSON saw that the fire-bug was straining every nerve to reach the protecting shadow of the wood.

"If he succeeds in making that ahead of me, he will escape."

The Man of Iron was fleet of foot and he redoubled his exertions.

He came up with his man hand over hand.

"You may as well stop," exclaimed the pursuer, throwing his powerful right hand forward to seize him.

He intended to catch him by the collar of his coat, but the fugitive, as if suspecting his purpose, ducked his head forward, at the very instant the attempt was made.

Instead of grasping the collar, therefore, his steel-like fingers closed upon the slack portion of the garment, just between the shoulders.

"I've got you, my fire-bug!"

The hand shut together like the irresistible

claws of the octopus and Orson Oxx drew back with fierce violence.

But with inimitable and altogether unexpected dexterity, the fugitive slid out of his garment and shot ahead like an arrow from the bow.

Orson Oxx had slackened his gait, feeling certain of his man, when, to his amazement, he saw him a dozen feet ahead, dart into the shadow of the wood.

With a muttered exclamation of anger, the detective made a furious plunge for him, but it was utterly impossible to overtake him before he reached the protecting gloom.

This achievement threw all the advantage on the side of the fugitive, who was necessarily more familiar with the grove, which presented itself so opportunely as a refuge.

At the great risk of breaking his neck, Orson Oxx continued the pursuit, holding his hands and the coat in front of him, to ward off the limbs with which he was liable to come in contact.

The grove of trees was no more than a hundred feet across, although considerably greater in length.

The detective kept up his fierce run, until he emerged from the wood on the other side.

Then he stopped.

One glance was enough to show him that the Winking Demon was not in front of him.

He had concealed himself among the trees.

Orson Oxx stepped back, so as to stand among them, and threw the coat of the wretch to the ground.

Then he stood motionless, listening with all his faculties.

Not a sound reached his ear to betray the spot where the villain was in hiding.

Having secured shelter, he was too cunning to reveal himself to such a dangerous foe.

"He can't stay here all night," muttered Oxx, grimly resolved to "freeze" him out.

It was useless to attempt any search, where the darkness was such that he was obliged to feel every step he advanced.

It was manifest that the fugitive would not seek to make his way out of danger by following the regular path, when he would be certain of detection.

After a few minutes' thought, Orson Oxx determined on a venture which was purely guess-work.

He stealthily picked his way among the trees, until he was fully fifty feet from the path, when he stopped and remained standing as motionless as the trunk of the oak beside him.

His hope was that, after a few minutes, the Demon would begin stealing his way out of the wood.

When he should do so, more than likely the keen ear of Orson Oxx would detect the cautious movement.

Then, like a crouching Indian he would creep up, and leaping upon his shoulders, pin him to the earth.

As he stood thus, the detective caught the faint rustle of the night wind among the branches overhead, but nothing was heard to indicate the passage of a human foot.

While he remained all attention, Orson Oxx's thoughts also were busy.

He began to ask himself what he would do, in case he should be able to seize the incendiary, thus far from the scene of his attempted crime.

Would his declaration that he had pursued Algol Langdon, after catching him in the act of setting fire to the building, be accepted as proof against the villain?

So far as the detective had been able to ascertain, as we have said, no one in the village of Ardville had dreamed of suspecting the nabob of such an execrable crime.

Much as they hated the miscreant, would they be willing to accept the word of the stranger who accused him?

Orson Oxx began to suspect that with all his intuition and skill in such matters, he had not managed the affair properly.

Suppose Algol Langdon should turn about and charge him before the villagers of attempting to fire the building?

Beyond question, he would be believed by the populace, whose fury in the present instance would not have the restraining presence of Brayton Russell.

This view of the business impressed itself more and more upon the detective as the minutes slipped by.

Finally he turned about and made his way back to the village, which he had left in such precipitate haste, spurred on by the certainty that it was to be his pleasure to run a most execrable wretch to earth.

And on the road he had the grim misery of reflecting that the desperate escape of the Winking Demon would be sure to make him more careful in committing his crimes, thereby increasing in that ratio the difficulty of capturing him.

CHAPTER XXVII.

ETHEL LANGDON WRITES A LETTER.

DESPITE the terrible trial to which Ethel Langdon had been subjected, she experienced a relief when Mrs. Julliard, the matron, as

she called herself, gave consent for her to write as many letters as she chose to her friends.

As it was the intention of our heroine to impart all the information she could, she made a number of inquiries of the woman, all of which were answered promptly and accurately.

Then, when left alone in her room, she put pen to paper:

"MY DEAREST BRAYTON:—

"After you left me last night my uncle called me into his library, where there were two strangers. He introduced them as Doctors Bell and Thompson. I had no suspicion what all this signified, but soon learned that it was a pretended medical examination of my mental soundness.

"It lasted but a few minutes, when I was dragged into a closed carriage, the two strangers accompanying me. I was held between them and the horses were lashed into a full run.

"The memory of that awful ride makes me shudder. My senses were stupefied by some powerful drug; but I know the ride was a long one.

"I was carried into this dreadful place, where I found the sun was shining, when my senses came back to me.

"You know why my uncle sent me here; it was to separate us. He is determined I shall never be your wife.

"I have made inquiries of the matron, Mrs. Julliard, who informs me that this is a private asylum, of which her husband, Doctor Bristow Julliard, is the superintendent. It is known as Julliard's Asylum for the Insane, having no other distinctive name, so far as I can learn.

"This morning when I awoke I found a roommate with me. She was a pleasing-mannered lady and for a time I believed that her mind was as sound as my own.

"But, without any warning, she became very violent, declared herself to be the Queen of the Cannibal Islands, and, fearing I had come to dethrone her, drew a dagger and attempted to kill me. I kept her at bay a few minutes by persuasions, but they soon lost their effect. At the very moment of despair, the matron opened the door.

"When I made known my danger she removed me to this room, where I am all alone—no one present except you in my thoughts.

"Come to me at once, dearest Brayton! Surely this outrage cannot be legalized. If my uncle has the power to put me in an insane asylum I am sure the law will not give him power to continue me there.

"I shall count the hours until you come.

"I think of you and dream of you and pray for you. Were I not cheered by the hope of soon being in your arms, I would never want to leave this place.

"Fly on wings of love to me as I would to you.

Ethel had scarcely finished this warm, loving letter, when Mrs. Julliard softly opened the door and asked whether the missive was ready.

The maiden quickly sealed and handed it to the matron who passed out.

As she did so, she failed to observe that she dropped something on the floor.

Ethel saw that one of the keys of the tunch which she carried on a looped wire at her waist, had fallen.

Our heroine sprang forward, picked it up and was on the very point of calling to the woman, when she was restrained by some singular impulse.

"I am tempted to give it to her for her kindness in taking charge of my letter.

"But why should I do so? It may prove of service to me."

In the mean time, Mrs. Julliard moved softly along the hall, descended the stairs to the second floor, and so on to the first, where she entered the office of her husband.

The latter, who was a small, nervous old gentleman, writing at a handsome cylinder desk, looked up.

"Well, what is it, dear?"

"Our new arrival of last night seems to be of a literary turn."

"Why so?" asked the superintendent.

"She has been writing a long letter."

"To whom?"

"To whom would it be but her lover?"

"She has a lover, then?"

"Did you ever know such a beautiful miss to be without one or more lovers?"

"Can't say that I have; how is she?"

"Very quiet."

"Does there seem to be much the matter with her?"

"Bristow," said the wife, in a low voice, and with a meaning smile, "there's nothing more the matter with her than there is with you or me."

"That's what I thought; but let's see her letter."

The missive was handed to the superintendent, who proceeded very deliberately to break the seal.

Spreading out the sheet, he read every word to his wife, both laughing with enjoyment over the sacred utterances of one loving heart to another.

When all the entertainment possible had been extracted, Dr. Bristow Julliard burned it up.

Which is not only the custom of himself, but of the majority of those who have charge of the asylums for the insane.

"She has considerable ability," remarked Dr. Julliard, with a grin. "I hope she will continue to write such letters, for she must enjoy doing so, and I'm sure we enjoy reading them."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A REMARKABLE EXPERIENCE.

ETHEL LANGDON was possessed of a keen intellect, which was sharpened by the frightful trial to which she had been subjected.

Before the letter was written the nausea resulting from the drug had passed off, and she was herself again.

Mrs. Julliard had not been gone long from her room, when the lady, having eaten something, fell to thinking seriously of her deplorable situation.

Until that time she had felt convinced that her stay in the asylum would be brief.

She was sure that as soon as Brayton learned where she was he would hasten to her rescue, and nothing could keep them apart.

"If he doesn't know by this time, he will as soon as he receives my letter—that is, if it reaches him!"

It seemed to her as if the latter words fell from her lips without any volition of her own.

She started up as though she had heard the hiss of a rattlesnake at her elbow.

"If the letter reaches him," she repeated; "why was I so foolish as to imagine they would send it? They will never allow it to leave this place."

"But Brayton will find me all the same," she added, her glowing face attesting her faith in her noble lover.

Shortly after the matron returned to remove the tray and dishes, Ethel having written her letter before eating anything.

When the woman entered the room she looked so sharply about that Ethel knew she had already missed the key from the large number at her girdle.

Our heroine hoped she would ask no questions for she was too conscientious to tell a falsehood, even though her liberty or life might be at stake.

But Mrs. Julliard must have acted on the principle that no female patient in a lunatic asylum ever uttered the truth, for she made not the slightest reference to her loss.

She probably concluded that the key had been lost somewhere else than in that particular room.

"Did you send the letter?" asked Ethel.

"Yes, dear; it was just in time to catch the southern mail and it ought to reach your friend this afternoon."

And all the same Ethel Langdon was as certain the letter had been destroyed as she was that it had been written.

But she learned to hide her suspicions and bade the matron a pleasant good-day when she passed out.

Our heroine improved the time at her command as best she could.

She had learned before that she was on the third story of a long and rather narrow building, which, as a matter of course, had been constructed for a lunatic asylum.

Her front windows (being the only ones in fact) did not afford her a very extended view of the surrounding country; but she saw there was a good deal of woodland.

The road which wound around the building, turned off into the woods in front, through which she judged it passed only a brief distance, when it reached the main highway.

These features were all she could fix in her mind, but she did that thoroughly.

Her meals were brought to her at regular hours and she was asked to make known any wish she might have.

She thanked the matron and said nothing was wanted.

Thus the long wearisome day passed and night came.

At nine o'clock the gas (which was manufactured on the premises), was turned off, and she understood that she might expect to hear nothing more from the matron until the next day.

It was near midnight, when Ethel arose and stealthily inserted the key in the door of her room.

She had tried it during the day, and, with a throbbing heart discovered that it would unlock the door.

If there were no bolts on the outside, it would admit her into the hall, and possibly would take her further.

As silently as a shadow, she drew the door inward and stepped into the passage way.

An oil lamp was burning dimly upon a stand at the further end of the hall, but its light did little more than make the darkness visible.

With the same silence the maiden stole along the hall and descended to the second story.

"Can it be there is no one watching?" she asked herself, astonished that she was not interfered with.

On the first floor, she made her way without difficulty to the massive front door.

"If the key is in the door I have hope," she thought, as she advanced on tiptoe toward it.

Alas! the key was missing!

In an institution of that character, the danger of forcing the doors is from within instead of from without.

Ethel Langdon was in despair.

Suddenly she heard a slight footfall behind her.

Turning her head, she caught the outlines of a woman's figure stealing forward.

Supposing it was the matron, she stood still and awaited her approach, wondering what punishment would be inflicted.

But as she glided up beside her, she whispered eagerly, as she gripped the delicate arm of Ethel with a force which almost made her cry out with pain.

"I have come! It is I, the Queen of the Cannibal Islands!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

UNDER THE STARS.

ETHEL LANGDON had descended to the first floor of the asylum, whence she hoped to escape, when she found herself confronted by the massive door, from which the huge key had been removed.

Wondering why she had ever held the belief that it was possible for her to get out of such a prison, she was about to turn back when she was approached by the violent lunatic who would have killed her that forenoon but for the timely appearance of the matron.

At that moment our heroine heartily wished she had never left her apartment.

But, for the time being, no one would have suspected the sanity of Hannah Hahlo.

"How did you get out of your room?" she whispered.

"The matron dropped a key with which I opened my door."

"How fortunate!"

"How was it you were able to leave your apartment?"

"I leave it nearly every night; I've been in the hall more than twenty times when everybody else was asleep."

"How did you manage to do it without detection?"

"I made the key."

"How?"

"I got some wire out of an old bonnet frame of mine, and, one day I twisted it into such a shape that I can open any door on our floor; there it is!"

The woman held up something, but there was not enough light for Ethel to perceive it.

She did not doubt the truth of what was said, however.

"My intention was to open all the doors on our floor, and let every one out; what a lively time that would make for the matron and her old man in the morning!"

"Most undoubtedly it would."

"Then I thought I would wait till I had another key made with which I would open the doors on the other floors and release all the men and women. That I calculate will make a rum-pus."

"I am afraid it would be dangerous."

"Who cares? But I have changed my mind."

"In what respect?"

"What's the use of bothering about other folks? We will all have enough to do in this world if we attend to our own business."

"That is true."

"Instead of trying to free them, I made up my mind to look after myself and no one else."

"How will you do that?"

"I shall unlock this door and pass out."

"Can you do it?"

"I'll soon show you; I've been down stairs a dozen nights with my wire, working to make it fit."

"And you think you have succeeded?"

"I got it perfect last night."

"Why didn't you leave then?"

"It was so near morning that I thought I wouldn't have much chance; so I went back and waited till this evening."

At this Hannah Hahlo stooped over and inserted her ingenious key into the lock.

She worked it with much skill and care, and, in a moment or two, Ethel distinctly heard the bolt slip back.

Then she shifted several large bolts, removed a slide and chain, gave a quick pull and the door was drawn inward several inches.

Ethel Langdon plainly caught sight of the twinkling stars through the opening.

"You will go with me!" asked the other.

"Yes," answered our heroine, doubting much whether, after what she had learned of her disposition, she was doing a wise thing in trusting herself in the company of the lunatic.

But she feared, if she refused, she would be attacked right there in the lower hall.

The lunatic drew the door back further.

The huge structure moved on its hinges without a creak.

The ladies stepped through, and the door was closed behind them.

They were now outside the building.

"Is not the place surrounded by a high fence?" asked Ethel, while they stood for several minutes in the shadow of the door.

"Yes; the fence is eight feet high, all the way around."

"How shall we get over that?"

"I'll show you; there's something else to be afraid of."

"What is that?"

"The big watch-dog; if he sees us, he will go for us like a loosened tiger."

"How can he fail to see us?" asked Ethel, who again felt as though she were committing a great mistake in stealing out of the building as she did.

But, with the conviction that her letter to Brayton Russell would never be delivered to him, came the belief that her uncle had concealed her abduction so skillfully, that her betrothed would not be able to follow her.

She was therefore convinced that her only hope lay in doing something for herself.

Then came the deciding answer:

"The dog is in his kennel at the other end of the yard—that is to the left; we will turn to the right."

"Then we ought to be able to avoid him?"

"If we are careful; come."

Hannah Hahlo went down the stone steps as silently as a shadow, Ethel Langdon following closely.

The grounds of the Julliard Asylum were laid out with much taste, and a moment later, the fugitives were walking over the fine graveled walks, where the thin shoes made a rasping noise that threatened to betray them.

In the clear starlight they were able to distinguish the patches of grass, on which they stepped and walked with the same stillness as if treading upon a velvet carpet.

The one great dread of Ethel was the dog.

Hannah Hahlo had been engaged in preparing for this attempt for weeks past and she had used an ingenuity almost incredible in any one of a sound mind.

Obscured as was her intellect at times, yet it retained a certain cunning that was wonderful.

Eyes and ears of the fugitives were strained, as they moved like phantoms over the grass toward the high fence which interposed itself like a Chinese wall across their path.

She had decided what to do if the dog bounded upon the scene.

She had managed to sharpen another piece of the wire from the bonnet-frame until it was like a needle.

This was now grasped in her hand ready for use.

If the dog should appear, she would try to soothe him, but, if he would not be soothed, she would jam the stiletto through his eye into his brain.

Then he would stay "soothed."

CHAPTER XXX.

OVER THE GARDEN WALL.

BUT the precautions of the fair fugitives proved sufficient, without such extreme measures.

They reached the high fence which inclosed the asylum and the grounds, without any molestation from the Cerberus who was placed there to give warning of just such attempts.

"Here we are!" said Ethel, wondering how this difficulty was to be surmounted.

In the gloom, she saw her guide swing her arms several times, as though she was throwing something.

So she was.

A faint thud on the other side of the fence explained what it was.

A weight attached to a strong cord had been thrown over the top and its impingement against the boards was heard by the listeners.

On each occasion, the woman jerked upon the cord several times as though she were trying to catch a fish.

After several such attempts, the weight tumbled back again at her feet and the throw was repeated.

Finally it caught fast.

Hannah Hahlo jerked smartly at it a number of times, then gave a long steady pull and repeated her first maneuvers.

All the time it remained firm.

"That's good," she said in a low voice, "it's caught fast."

"What has?"

"The hook, you goose."

"What are you going to do with it, now that it has caught fast?"

"Wait and see."

And then, without the least difficulty or hesitation, the agile woman drew herself to the top of the fence with the apparent ease and skill with which a sailor climbs the rigging hand-over-hand.

Pausing at the top, she looked down and said, in a guarded voice:

"Come on; don't be afraid."

Our heroine hesitated only a moment.

Her arms were free, her weight light, and it proved easier than she suspected.

Hannah Hahlo reached down and assisted her to the summit, where the two paused, like a couple of hunters in the wood, who are consulting as to the proper course by which they shall get on.

"That's quite a jump," remarked Ethel, look-

ing down in the gloom, "but not enough to be dangerous."

"There isn't any need of taking it," said the other, who disengaged the hook from where it had caught on one side and secured it on the other, so they were able to lower themselves without trouble.

At last they stood on the outside of the asylum grounds.

They were absolutely free for the time at least.

Now the question remained as to how this freedom should be made "permanent."

Hannah Hahlo continued to display the same surprising resources that had been hers from the first.

"In the morning," she said, "there will be a high old time, when the matron and her husband find out we are gone. They will start the biggest kind of a search; what do you think is best for us to do?"

"Get as far away as possible."

"There's where you make a great mistake."

"Wherein lies the mistake?"

"That's what the old fool will think we have done; he will send to all the railroad stations within a dozen miles; he will start his attendants over every road to make inquiries, and others will roam through the woods and across fields. If we succeed in getting six miles away, we can't avoid being seen by some one who will tell his friends."

"In what manner, then, can we help ourselves?"

"We won't go a half-mile from the asylum."

"Where shall we stay?"

"I have a place in mind; old Julliard will never suspect that, while he is ransacking the country for leagues, the parties he wants are nestling right under the walls of his prison."

And the escaped patient laughed, as she was warranted in doing.

"Where is the place?" asked Ethel, who could not avoid a feeling of uneasiness over the consciousness that she was continually placing herself more and more in the power of a woman, who, but for the interference of another, would have taken her life a short time before.

But really there seemed no help for it.

She had advanced so far that it was impossible to turn back.

She must go on, though it led to certain death.

"It is at the house of Mr. John Burrage; he keeps a truck farm, not more than a third of a mile away. He lives there with his wife and has no children."

"What is your reason for counting upon his active sympathy?"

"He is an old acquaintance of my father; he knew me when I was a little girl; I have sat on his knee many a time and there is nothing he would not do for me, were it in his power."

"That being the case, let us hurry to his place."

The two walked quietly away through the darkness, Hannah Hahlo saying, as she did so:

"We will stay in his house for two or three days, until the excitement blows over. Then, some night, he will carry us away in his wagon and we shall be free!"

And the overjoyed woman clapped her hands with delight.

The poor lady went forward with the assurance of one who was familiar with every foot of the ground.

The road leading from the asylum, wound its way through a piece of wild wood for a furlong, though the direct distance was less.

It then debouched into the main highway, back from which only a short distance, stood the house of John Burrage.

"It is so late," said Ethel, "that we shall have difficulty in arousing him."

"Not a great deal; such men are always dreaming about robbers and are easy to awaken; but don't talk; I think I heard some one moving in the road ahead of us."

Our heroine held her peace, though she doubted the truth of what her guide said.

Nevertheless the fears of the latter were confirmed a minute later in a remarkable manner.

The ladies had advanced half the distance through the wood, when they reached a point which gave them a more extended view than at any other spot.

The trees had been cut down on either hand, so that a space fifty feet wide was unshaded by trees except when the sun was low in the horizon.

The starlight revealed this quite plainly, in the gloom of the night, as the two approached it.

"What did I tell you?"

The guide caught the arm of Ethel Langdon in her rigid grasp and pointed ahead, when she whispered the words.

The figure of a man was plainly seen in the middle of the highway.

His position was such that there could be no mistake about his personality.

It was not a tree nor shadow, but it was a human being beyond all doubt.

He was standing absolutely motionless, as if listening for something, which might be the ladies who had such a horror of being overtaken and recaptured.

CHAPTER XXXI.

"YOU ARE MY PRISONER."

AFTER Orson Oxx returned to his hotel from his vain pursuit of the fire-bug, probably there was no more disgusted individual in the State of New York.

"I had the game in my hand," he muttered, fairly gnashing his teeth with chagrin, "and then let it slip: I am not likely to have another such a chance. The Winking Demon is no fool and he will not be as careless as he has been."

But the most skillful detective cannot count on an unbroken line of successes and the sleep of the Man of Iron was scarcely less sound than usual.

When he awoke in the morning his mind was as clear as a bell.

"I had some thought," he said to himself, "of going on to Brandon and joining in the hunt for the missing lady, but I feel as though I have no excuse for doing so."

"It's all such plain sailing now that if Brayton Russell don't win his girl, he don't deserve to have her."

"If I were in his place, I would resent any interference from outsiders: if necessary I would announce that I had taken charge of the campaign and intended to run it on that line if it took all of my natural life— Hello! come in!"

The detective was about to descend the stairs when some one rapped smartly on the door. When he opened it the landlord handed him a letter with the remark that he supposed it was intended for him, and was addressed to Thomas Tumbrell, which was the name Orson had registered under, when he returned to the Delaware House late at night from his unsuccessful pursuit of the Winking Demon.

With some surprise the detective opened the letter and this surprise became amazement when he read the following:

"HOMESTEAD, Friday, Nov. —.

"THOMAS TUMBRELL, Esq.:—

"MY DEAR SIR:—Will you please call at the Homestead at ten o'clock this morning? I have a proposition to make to you which will prove profitable to us both and greatly to your interest."

"A. LANGDON."

"That's very singular," muttered the detective, who, as may well be supposed, was puzzled to understand all the phases of this message.

In the first place, there was no intimation of the nature of the business for which the interview was asked.

Again, the name by which the detective was addressed was extremely suggestive.

It was near eleven o'clock, the preceding night, when Orson Oxx wrote that signature on the register of the inn.

The circumstances were so peculiar that it was impossible that Algol Langdon had returned after that hour and taken it from the register.

"He has called here early this morning; he has looked over the book, and obtained from the landlord a description of me, which of course must have corresponded with that of the countryman who was in the bar-room last night, treating folks in a reckless fashion. It was then a very easy thing for him to make up his mind that the man who followed him so sharply last night was a detective."

"A corollary of such a conclusion would be that Orson Oxx was the identical individual who was figuring in a dual character."

But why this interview?

The matchless detective could frame a dozen different reasons; but he had no assurance that any one of them was right.

Of one thing he was more and more convinced.

Algol Langdon, the Winking Demon was a miscreant of extraordinary cunning.

It looked very much as if he were inviting the detective to enter into a brain contest with him.

"I'm glad to do it," exclaimed Orson Oxx, "for my creed is that when any man can overreach me, it is his duty to do so, and I shall admire his ability as a warrior, even though it unhorses me."

When the detective strolled from the hotel, he passed the house where the incendiary attempt had been made the night before.

He was struck by the fact that a number of persons were gathered around the door, which was open.

Oxx supposed they were discussing the last crime, when he observed that there was crape on the door.

The old lady was dead, and these were the neighbors who had gathered to perform the last melancholy duties to the departed.

A few subdued inquiries convinced Oxx that no one knew of the charred brush and sticks behind the little house which would have told their own story.

"She is better off," remarked the detective, with a sigh, as he passed on; "had Ethel Langdon been left to perform her holy work, possibly this would not have taken place; at any rate she would have been here to soothe her dying moments."

It was an incident by the way, yet, as is often the case, it was not without its indirect influence upon the main events of the narrative, which seems to be entirely outside of it.

Orson Oxx, while thoughtfully moving through the village, came to the conclusion that, in all his experience, he had never come in contact with a more execrable miscreant than Algol Langdon.

The officer had been asking himself whether it was his duty to remain and cail upon the villain, who, beyond a doubt, wished to use him for his own purpose, or go to the assistance of Brayton Russell.

When he first received the letter his inclination, as we have shown, was to leave his young friend to work out the rescue of his beloved without any help from him.

But he recalled that Russell was impetuous and hot-headed, and was as likely to get himself into trouble, as to assist a friend out of danger.

He might need a cool brain and a steady arm at his side.

Orson Oxx was in this state of doubt when he learned of the death of the aged invalid, who had been so tenderly cared for by the angelic Ethel Langdon.

It filled his soul with such burning indignation against the Winking Demon that he determined to enter the struggle against him directly.

"If I down him, as I believe I can, it will be the direct means of rescuing the young lady from a position which is not likely to be anything more than unpleasant and which must terminate of itself before many days."

"My duty is to bring down retribution upon his head, and that, with the help of Heaven, I shall do with the least delay possible."

At ten o'clock that forenoon Orson Oxx, in the same guise that he had used on his previous call, presented himself at the Homestead, and sounded the huge brass knocker.

Prosperity Johnson, as before, admitted him, without a suspicion of his identity with the entertaining old gentleman who appreciated in a monetary way the value of an interview with the servant.

Oxx walked into the library, where Algol Langdon received him with his usualunction.

The Winking Demon knew that this was the man who had come within a hair of arresting him the night before, after his attempt to fire the dwelling of the old lady Mrs. Moseman.

The Man of Iron was equally well aware that he had walked into the den of his deadliest enemy.

That enemy was a man of wonderful cunning and unparalleled treachery.

"Let the smartest win," was the thought of Orson Oxx.

"I received your note," said the visitor, taking the chair to which he was motioned, "and, you observe, am pretty nearly on time."

"Yes; you seem to be a very punctual man."

"I am to the extent of my ability."

"I hardly expected to find you in Ardville to-day."

"I was not certain I would be here myself; indeed, had I not received your note, I would have left by the early train."

"I was about to do so myself, when I observed a signature on the register which I was confident was that of the gentleman for whom I was looking."

"You then wanted to see me?"

Orson Oxx assumed an air of surprise, which he was far from feeling.

"I did; I was going to New York to try and hunt you up."

"I am glad you were saved that trouble for, though I am pretty well known there, you would have been likely to have had hard work to find me."

"So I feared, and I therefore congratulate myself on my success at this early stage."

"Well, Mr. Langdon, I am ready to receive

any proposition from you; what does this summons mean?"

"It means, sir, that you are my prisoner!"

As the Winking Demon uttered these startling words, he whipped out a revolver, which he must have held in his hand all the time under the table, and leveled it at the amazed Man of Iron.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A COURAGEOUS ESCORT.

THE dim figure of a man, standing in the middle of a lonely road at night, is generally an alarming sight.

Ethel Langdon and her escort, Hannah Hahlo were moving stealthily through the wood, when they were brought to a stand-still by such a startling occurrence.

"What shall we do?" asked our heroine in a whisper.

"I'll flee him," was the assuring answer of the guide.

"How?"

"I have that sharp wire which I prepared for the dog; I will slip up to him and run it into his eye. I guess then he will be glad enough to stand aside."

"Oh don't do that," pleaded the horrified Ethel, retaining her grasp on the arm of her companion.

"Why not?"

"It will kill him!"

"What of it? Hasn't the Queen of the Cannibal Islands the right to kill any of her subjects? Let me go."

"Wait! there, he has moved aside."

Fortunately such was the fact.

Whoever the man was, he seemed to have got tired of playing the part of post, and now started down the road ahead of the fugitives.

As soon as he passed beneath the shadows cast by the trees, he became invisible, but there was little doubt that he was walking in advance in the same direction with the couple.

Furthermore, it was not likely that he had any suspicion that any person was behind him.

A few minutes later, he reached the main highway where there were no trees.

He was then in sight again about the same distance in front, as when first discovered.

"See me scare him!"

As Hannah Hahlo uttered the words, she moved rapidly forward and called out in a husky undertone:

"Wait a minute, sir; I want your life!"

The man heard it, cast one horrified glance behind him, and, at sight of the shadowy terror bearing down upon him, broke into a desperate run, with the single outcry:

"MURDER!"

A world of terror was in that single, gasping cry, and his speed was such that he vanished from sight almost instantly.

Hannah Hahlo laughed heartily, as well she might, but poor Ethel saw too much grim danger in the situation to feel anything like mirth.

The declaration of her companion that she meant to kill the stranger, unless he moved from their path, together with what had taken place during the day, showed that the lunatic was unrestrained by conscience.

Rather, perhaps, her moral sense was so perverted, that she was unable to distinguish between right and wrong.

There was no saying when she would turn like a tigress upon her with whom she was now so friendly.

Ethel would have given anything in her power could she have been transferred at that moment to the room which she had been so eager to leave.

But that was impossible.

The fact that Hannah declared that the house of John Burrage was close at hand gave hope that her mind would be so wholly occupied until they reached there, that she would not indulge in any "side issues."

"Where is the house of your friend?" asked Ethel.

"Yonder, just back in the field from the road."

She pointed across the highway, and, following the direction, Ethel saw a star-like point of light shining out from the gloom.

"Do you notice that?" asked our heroine.

"Of course; how could I help it?"

"They are up late; it isn't possible they expect us?"

"How could they? Maybe some of the family (there are only two) are sick."

While they were talking, they were moving forward.

A moment later, they reached the large gate, which was wide enough to admit the passage of a wagon.

Hannah Hahlo deftly unfastened it, closing it again, after they had gone through.

"Do you know whether they have any dogs?"

"Yes, they have a big savage one."

"Suppose he attacks us?" asked Ethel stopping in their walk.

"Who cares? I will run my wire into his eye; I can kill any one with that."

"It is a dangerous instrument."

"I intended it should be; that's what I made it for; if John Burrage doesn't behave himself, I will push it into his eye, and if his wife doesn't do as I want her to, I'll serve her in the same way."

This was not the conversation to cheer the lonely minutes, but the speaker indulged in similar observations, as they approached the house.

Very naturally Ethel Langdon held the dog in great dread, for he would not be likely to permit such an approach at that ghostly hour without challenging the parties.

The couple were within a hundred feet of the door, when they were terrified by a growl.

Ethel stopped, whispering:

"It won't do to go any further."

"I'm not afraid," was the response of her escort, who proved the truth of her boast, by placing herself in advance and walking directly toward the dog, who was at the front door and prepared to dispute their way.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE HOUSE OF REFUGE.

It was close upon midnight, and the scene was indescribably lonesome and impressive.

The courageous woman of unsettled mind advanced determinedly toward the mastiff, grasping her peculiar weapon with the purpose of plunging it into the brain of the animal the instant he leaped upon her.

Nothing loth, the dog rose to his feet and walked resolutely forward with the intention of making an attack.

The affrighted Ethel recoiled, for she foresaw a terrible scene.

But, most fortunately, before the collision could take place the owner of the dog detected the ominous sounds, and drew open the door.

"Bowser, come here!" he called, in such sharp tones that the canine obeyed, trotting back, still growling, and lying down at his master's feet.

John Burrage had a candle in his hand, which he held over his head and peered out in the darkness.

"Who's there?" he asked, catching a glimpse of the figure of Hannah, who was in advance.

"Don't be scared; it is I," was called back.

"Who in thunder is I?" growled the farmer (in a small way), still trying to penetrate the gloom. "If you don't speak, I'll set Bowser on you, and he'll chew you up quicker'n lightning."

"I am Hannah Hahlo, and this is a friend of mine, Miss Ethel Langdon, and we've come to make a call on you."

"Strike me it's rather late to make a call," said Mr. Burrage, who suspected the truth.

Hannah Hahlo had spoken truly when she said he was an old friend of the family, who knew her well.

John had frequently visited the young woman in the asylum and knew that she properly belonged there.

But he understood insane persons very well and could humor their fancies.

He therefore drew the door wide open and invited them to enter.

Hannah did so, Ethel stepping after her, and the door was shut.

To the surprise of our heroine she saw a second man sitting in a chair, leaning back, with his hands clasped behind his head, as though he was very much at home indeed.

He was slim, stoop-shouldered, and had a sandy goatee and very red hair.

He looked inquiringly at the strange visitors, who, on the invitation of Mr. Burrage, took seats.

"I expected to find you alone," said Hannah Hahlo, in a voice of disappointment.

"I had been, I would have been asleep long ago."

"Who is your ugly-looking friend?"

"Miss Hahlo and Miss Langdon, this is my brother-in-law, Jake Calkins, who lives in New Jersey. He came down this evening on a visit, and we were sitting up unusually late talking over old times."

Hannah looked keenly at him, while Ethel bowed in recognition of the rather effusive salute of the visitor.

"I think I've heard of Jake Calkins," said Hannah; "you used to tell our folks that he was the wonderful falsifier of Monmouth county, New Jersey."

"That's me," said Mr. Calkins, rising from his chair, bowing and smiling with pride; "I've worked hard for that reppytation, and now that I've got it I mean to hang onto it."

"Was it ever disputed?" asked John Burrage, who had also taken his seat, and was rather pleased with the eccentric ways of his relative by marriage.

"Oh, yes; I've had several ambitious rivals; and my own brother Mart, down near Freehold, run me purty hard for awhile, but they've pulled off and left the track to me."

As a matter of course, both these men looked upon their visitors as insane.

John Burrage knew Hannah Hahlo to be in that unfortunate mental condition, although, for hours at a time, she gave no evidence of it.

Miss Langdon was her companion in flight, and there was no reason to think otherwise concerning her.

Jake Calkins did not suspect the truth, until the conversation had proceeded further, and Hannah gave an account of the ingenious manner by which they had escaped from imprisonment.

Even then it was hard for the man from the Jersey Pines to realize that he was in the company of two lunatics.

Ethel Langdon understood the situation, and saw that it was useless to say anything at that time.

She sat quiet and demure, listening to the conversation, and looking upon the curious scene.

"We have come to stay with you," said Hannah, who seemed to be in high spirits.

"That's good; I am always glad to have company."

"How long are you going to have that monumental liar over there?"

"He is likely to remain several days."

"We can stand him that long, I guess," was the resigned remark of Hannah, accompanied by a sigh, which made the other laugh.

"How long do you intend I shall be honored with your company?"

"I did think of staying three or four hundred years, but I won't make it that long."

"How long will it be?"

"Not more than a couple of days; you know old Julliard will be scouring through the country for us to-morrow and next day, and if we stick our nose out of doors, he'll nab us."

"You want to wait here then until the excitement blows over—is that the idea?"

"That's it, exactly."

"Well, would you like to retire?"

"What time is it?"

"It's between twelve and one."

"I'm agreeable; what do you say, Miss Langdon?"

"It's high time."

"I'll call my wife."

Mrs. Burrage was summoned and she invited the ladies up-stairs.

Hannah went to the top with a couple of bounds, but Ethel was more dignified.

At the bottom of the stairs, she paused long enough to gain a few words with John Burrage.

They talked in whispers which no one else heard.

"Every insane person believes he is of sound mind," she said, "but I can prove it in my case, if the opportunity be given."

He nodded his head in a weary way, as though he was accustomed to that particular hallucination.

"I was placed in the asylum last night, by a relative who wishes me out of the way. He will spend a great deal of money to keep me here."

"Who is he?"

"Algol Langdon and he lives near Ardville."

"I don't know him."

"I will give more money than he to get away."

"But that's mighty hard, Miss Langdon."

"I know that, but it wouldn't be so hard, if my friends can only know where I am."

"Why don't you send 'em word?"

"How can I?"

"Write 'em a letter?"

"But no one— Will you mail one for me?"

"Certainly I will; write it in the morning and give it to me; there's nothing ag'in' the law in that."

"I will pay—"

"There, go on with your friend, or she will suspect something."

Murmuring her thanks, Ethel hastened to her room.

John Burrage walked back to his esteemed brother-in-law.

"Jake, I'll be hanged if I don't believe one of them women is of sound mind."

"I know it," replied Jake Calkins.

But the trouble with this visitor from New Jersey was that he had fixed upon the wrong lady as the sane one.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE SENTINEL ON THE OUTER WALL.

UP to this hour, Ethel Langdon was clearly of the opinion that she had committed a great blunder in leaving the lunatic asylum in company with Hannah Hahlo.

As we have shown, there were many times when she would have given anything at her command, could she have safely returned to the room, where she would be beyond the reach of any violent outbreak on the part of the lunatic who was acting as her escort.

But, after the few hurried words with John Burrage, she was glad beyond measure that she had made the attempt to escape.

"He is an honest man," she thought; "he may think it wrong to assist me in getting away from the institution to which I have been committed, but he will do me the favor he promised."

"He will mail my letter, which must fall into the hands of Brayton within twenty-four hours."

"That point gained," mused the maiden, a smile stealing over her countenance, at the recollection of the loved of her heart, "and he will not require long to rescue me."

All this constituted a most delightful background for the oppressive present, but she could not shake off the horror of the immediate company of Hannah Hahlo.

The two were obliged to share the same room and the same bed.

Ethel could not conjecture what fearful whim might take possession of that erratic mind at any moment.

But, reasoning as best she could concerning the diseased brain of another, it seemed to her that the entire change of thought into which she had been forced would prevent any outbreak.

At any rate, there was no way in which our heroine could avoid the risk, so far as she was concerned, for, if she should make the request of Mrs. Burrage, it might bring on the very assault she held in unspeakable dread.

"I will trust my Heavenly Father to take care of me," was the last sentence which trembled on her lips.

Then she closed her eyes and slept.

In the morning she was awake before her companion who slumbered heavily.

The thought of the letter was on her mind, and, hastily robing herself and descending the stairs, she asked Mr. Burrage for the materials needed.

These were furnished, and sitting down at the stand, she wrote substantially the same letter she had penned within the asylum the day previous, changing its recital of facts, as a matter of course.

This was finished, sealed and handed to John Burrage, with a dollar bill with which to pay the postage.

At this time, Ethel was in the sitting room and parlor of the house.

Mrs. Burrage was busy preparing breakfast while Hannah was heard stirring overhead.

John Burrage had come in just as the missive was finished, but Jake Calkins was invisible.

After Burrage had placed the precious missive in his coat pocket (being told by Ethel that she would accept no change for the postage), and assured her that it should be mailed within the next hour, he drew his chair beside her.

"They're after you," he said in a significant tone and with a meaning grin on his face.

"I suppose so," she replied, startled nevertheless.

"You two must have been missed early, for they've been looking for you since daylight."

"You have seen them?"

"Several of 'em a number of times."

"How do you manage to mislead them?"

"There's no trouble about that; Jake Calkins asked me as a special favor to let him have charge of the business of misleadin'. He's the boss misleader of the country; I never heard a man tell such sockdolagers as he does; some of his lies to the people who are out hunting for you are enough to lift a man's hat off his head."

"He seems to be proud of his reputation in that respect."

"I never saw a prouder man in all my life, well, as I's saying he's misled 'em, but about the lady up stairs; she's as crazy as a loon; I s'pose you know that?"

"I learned it yesterday."

"Her parents are old friends of mine and they would be anxious to have her put back in the asylum at once."

"How long has she been there?"

"Four years and more."

"What made her lose her mind?"

"It wassad business," said John Burrage with a shake of his head; "the one that she loved, died and her folks triel to make her marry an old rascal and she wouldn't and her mind gave way; but it's my duty to help take her back to the asylum."

"Undoubtedly such is the fact."

"She is very smart; she got away two years ago and it was a week before they could get her again. She is strong and active and it takes two or three men to handle her."

"Mr. Burrage, do you think I am crazy?"

The maiden looked straight in the face of the honest old fellow, who blushed and attempted to stare as directly into her countenance.

But her beauty overpowered him.

Still he would not prevaricate.

"I will say," he replied, "that I hain't seen any signs of craziness in you as yet."

Ethel laughed at his earnestness.

"And you never will see any; I want you to keep me here and take good care of me until my friends can come to me."

"I'm your friend and ca'chite I allers shall be; but it's going to be a mighty risky thing besides being very hard to keep you two from being discovered."

"What will you do with her?"

Before John Burrage could answer, the lady in question was heard descending the stairs, and, at the same moment a resounding knock was heard on the front door.

Ethel Langdon instantly moved her chair back so as to be beyond the line of sight.

The cunning Hannah Hable was equally quick to detect the danger and retreated noiselessly up-stairs again.

Jake Calkins who had returned from a walk outdoors, went forward and resolved himself into a bureau of misinformation.

Two men stood at the door, when it was opened.

"A couple of young ladies wandered away from Mr. Julliard's Asylum last night," said the spokesman, "and we are searching for them."

"I'm glad to hear it," said the unblushing Jake; "it is kind in you fellers to stop and tell us about it."

"Can you assist us in finding them?"

"If you paye nough wages I mought try it."

While inquiring, the men were peering around and over the shoulder of Jake, as though desirous of getting a view of the interior.

"You can come in and look around if you want to," said Calkins, stepping back and drawing the door wide open; "it may be that the women are hidin' under the boot-jack or have crawled up the chimney."

"No, I thank you; your word is sufficient," replied the gentleman, turning away with his companion.

CHAPTER XXXV.

TURNING THE TABLES WITH A VENGEANCE.

THE shrewdest and most guarded man must, in the very nature of things, sometimes be caught at fault.

Orson Oxx, when he walked into the library of the Winking Demon, knew that he faced a remorseless and wonderfully cunning enemy, yet he rather welcomed it as a battle royal.

Suddenly, while talking, Algol Langdon whipped out his cocked revolver from beneath the table and leveled it at the detective.

As he did so, his artificial eye winked and

the conquering wretch muttered the fearful words:

"It means, sir, you are my prisoner!"

The deadly weapon was leveled straight at the forehead of Orson Oxx, who was thus enabled to look directly down the gaping chamber, at the base of which he well knew nestled the fatal cartridge.

Algol Langdon had the drop on the Man of Iron.

Oxx was taken entirely unawares. He was leaning back in his chair, only a few feet away, with his arms folded. It was impossible to draw in time to defend himself; he was at the mercy of a merciless man.

The Winking Demon shut both eyes several times and grinned with triumph.

Orson Oxx acted in a singular manner, for, instead of recoiling, as one would naturally do, he leaned forward until his face was within one foot of the muzzle of the leveled pistol, when he sat still, his arms remaining folded.

He looked straight at his conqueror, without the least appearance of fright or agitation, although well aware that a slight increase of the pressure of the crooked finger, which wound about the trigger, was all that was needed to send the bullet crashing through his brain.

It was his expectation that some time such would be his death, sooner or later, and now he wondered whether his time had not come.

He smiled, and without removing his gaze from the face of Langdon asked:

"On what charge do you arrest me?"

"That of being an incendiary: you are as well aware as am I that you have been indulging in this original style of amusement for several months."

Orson Oxx started. At the same moment he winked his eye and unfolding his arms, made a peculiar signal.

His gaze showed he was looking at a point directly behind Algol Langdon.

His actions were precisely such as if he were signaling to some person stealthily approaching.

The suggestion was enough to send a chill down one's back, and it was so cleverly managed that it accomplished what was intended. With all the villain's cunning he was thrown off his guard for a single instant. Holding the weapon leveled, he partly turned his head, but it was only for the shortest possible space of time.

He suspected the purpose, and brought it back with lightning quickness, but, instantaneous as it seemed to be, the period was long enough for Orson Oxx's purpose. He made a single flirt with his left hand. The motion was so quick, that it was like magic: the eye was scarcely able to follow it, and the open palm struck the extended hand of Algol Langdon with such force that the revolver was knocked clean across the room.

The two men sat before each other unarmed.

"I'm rather inclined to the opinion," said the Man of Iron, in the same insinuating voice, "that I ain't your prisoner just yet; I shall be pleased to hear your view on the matter, Mr. Langdon."

The Winking Demon stamped upon the floor and exclaimed with an oath:

"You shall have it: there it is!"

The stamp was a signal, for which two men were waiting.

The door opened and they entered.

One was Shadrach Yelland, the sanguinary justice of the peace, who was so strongly in favor of lynching the prisoner, when caught under somewhat similar circumstances, a couple of nights before; and the other was Prosperity Johnson.

Both these men were eager to pounce upon the stranger, for whose arrest they had helped arrange.

Both, too, were extremely powerful and would not hesitate to attack any man.

True, the justices of the peace, on the occasion above alluded to, was handled rather roughly, but he maintained he was taken off his guard and that his defeat could not be repeated.

Both knew the prospective prisoner to be the man who escaped lynching so narrowly, and they held not a particle of doubt that he was the miscreant who had started so many fires in their village.

Orson Oxx leaped from his chair and sprung into position.

His back was against the wall in the corner, and his clinched fists were held up in front of him.

In that position he did not care how many men charged upon him.

His lever-like arms, his prodigious skill and marvelous science turned all such assaults into child's-play.

Such a guard is an effectual protection against an attack from those who use nature's weapons.

He did not fear even one who might assail him with a knife.

But it was no protection against the pistol.

The Man of Iron was on the watch for such a demonstration.

Had any one of the three men attempted to fire, he would have anticipated him.

But he always disliked the use of firearms.

The result was pretty sure to be death for some one concerned.

His tremendous fists were equally fatal, when occasion demanded, but rarely did he ever put forth all his strength.

He did not wish to harm Prosperity Johnson, but he meant to give Messrs. Yelland and Langdon a good taste before he was through.

There was not one of these three whom he considered a respectable antagonist.

He could knock them out with very little exertion.

The wiry Shadrach Yelland was the first to advance upon him, and he did so in a leaping, slugging fashion, which did more credit to his courage than to his judgment.

Instead of striking him a blow, which the Man of Iron could have done, with enough force to fracture his skull, he opened one hand and smote him directly across the face.

The blow cracked like a pistol, and the astonished Shadrach Yelland described a back somersault over the table in the middle of the room.

"It looks to me," remarked Orson Oxx, "as though this establishment needs cleaning out."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"CLEANING OUT" AN ESTABLISHMENT.

THEREUPON the Man of Iron proceeded to "clean out" the establishment to which he referred.

As Shadrach Yelland, Justice of the Peace, went backward over the table, his legs pointed upward like a pair of dividers.

Algol Langdon was barely able to leap out of his way. He saw that it would never do to come in personal collision with the Hercules in the corner.

Nothing less than a pistol-ball would subdue him; but the pistol of Langdon lay on the floor close to the feet of the monarch of the situation.

The Winking Demon, therefore, could only shrink in the opposite corner and watch for his chance.

"By and by he will move away," thought he; "then I will steal forward, pick up my revolver and shoot him in the back."

At the same instant the master of the Homestead roared to his servant, Prosperity, to attack the desperado.

"Dat's what I'm gwine to do," replied the huge African, beginning to dance about the room with great eagerness; "I'm gwine to come de ram trick chur him."

Orson Oxx saw from the peculiar actions of the negro that he intended to butt him.

He was desirous of saving Prosperity from injury, for he was a good fellow whom he liked, and who could not be blamed for the part he was taking in the singular proceedings.

"Is comin'; cl'ar de truck!"

It was not good generalship for the African to announce his intentions, besides which it was altogether unnecessary.

Orson Oxx saw the battering-ram approaching and leaped deftly aside.

The head of the African struck the wall with a force which made the whole house tremble.

"I tink dem walls am injured," was the characteristic remark of Prosperity, as he backed away from the corner and looked at the young man who smiled upon him.

"Keep away, my friend, or I shall hurt you!"

"It's 'ginning to be ob dat 'pinion myself," replied Prosperity backing until he reached the door, through which he bolted, as if shot from a gun.

Orson Oxx's blow in the face of Shadrach Yelland was a most demoralizing one.

The justice of the peace, as soon as he could shake himself together, crouched under the table, where he stayed.

He peered furtively from beneath, but he did not dare venture forth.

His smarting countenance and the resolute attitude of the young man convinced him that it wasn't wise to interfere just then.

Algol Langdon remained crouching in the corner.

Orson saw that neither dared attack him and he indulged in a few taunts with a view of spurring them up.

"Say, you Mr. Yelland, under the table," said Orson lowering his hands, placing them against his sides and laughing heartily, "why do you not come forth and arrest me?"

"You needn't crow," growled the crouching figure; "you'll be snatched up before you know it."

"But why don't you do it?" asked Orson; "there were three men of you who came in here to pull me and not one has placed a hand on me yet; what's the trouble?"

Mr. Yelland saw that in an argument of this kind, it was a difficult matter for him to present anything original or convincing; so he held his peace.

Thereupon Orson turned toward the Winking Demon.

"I think you made a remark a short time ago, to the effect that you viewed me in the light of a prisoner; may I ask whether you still cling to that opinion?"

The occasion was one to which the Winking Demon could not do justice.

Therefore he did not make the attempt, but remained quiet.

"You're a pretty specimen," added Orson, with a sneer, finding little prospect of rousing the wrath of the coward.

"I have no weapon in my hand, and you three dare not attack me. Well, if you won't do it, I shall have to attack you!"

The justice of the peace under the table groaned.

Mr. Langdon tried to crowd himself through the wall into the next room or outdoors.

As the Man of Iron sprung forward, Shadrach Yelland made a plunge for the door.

He went through more hastily than he anticipated, for a prodigious kick from Orson Oxx helped him materially.

Algol Langdon made a desperate attempt to imitate him.

He would have succeeded had he been about three times as fast, or had the Man of Iron chosen to permit him.

But as he dashed forward Orson Oxx caught him by his coat collar and the largest portion of his trowsers.

Lifting the howling wretch clear off his feet, he swung him back and forth several times like a pendulum.

When the amplitude of the vibrations were great enough, he let go.

A splintering wreck and crash followed.

Algol Langdon, the Winking Demon, was hurled straight through one of the windows of the library.

It so happened the window was closed.

Hence the destruction of glass and wood-work.

The window through which this plunge was made, considered strictly as a window, was not of much account immediately after the occurrence.

Prosperity Johnson, who had been cowering on the outside, concluded that when he saw his master coming through the window with the sash about his neck, it was time for him to do something.

Accordingly he did it.

Leaping out of the door, he dashed for the lane, shouting at the top of his voice:

"Murder! murder! thieves! fire! burglary! arson! and everything else under the sun!"

Orson Oxx looked around and saw there were no more worlds for him to conquer.

"I think I can be dispensed with in this section of the Union for the present," he remarked, feeling that, if he remained, he was likely to become involved in unpleasant consequences.

Accordingly he proceeded to make a change of base with as little delay as possible.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A WARM TRAIL.

ALL this time, it must be borne in mind, Brayton Russell did not allow the grass to grow under his feet.

He was so set back when he learned that his beloved was not imprisoned in the Brandon

Asylum, that he was at a loss to determine the next step he should take.

But a brief conference with Orson Oxx settled that, and, on the morning succeeding his disappointment, he was back again in the village in the company of Mr. Maggiore the lawyer.

"It is the most curious thing in the world," remarked the latter with a laugh.

"What's that?"

"Didn't you get my telegram?"

"I have received none from you."

"When did you leave Ardville?"

"Late last night."

"That accounts for it; I sent it this morning."

"What was its purport?"

"That you and I were fools."

"Why?"

"Did you ever hear of Doctor Julliard's Asylum?"

The two men looked in each other's face, for a moment, without speaking.

Then the engineer exclaimed impatiently:

"That beats everything! I knew of that place when I was a boy."

"And so did I, and yet it never entered the mind of either of us, even after we learned Miss Langdon was not in the Brandon Lunatic Asylum that she might be in that of Doctor Julliard."

"I did not think of it until this moment," said Brayton Russell, "and then only because you reminded me."

"It came to me immediately after we parted yesterday; I was sure it would be the same with you, and expected to see you return every hour; but, when you did not, I telegraphed you."

"Julliard's Asylum is about ten miles to the westward I believe," remarked Russell inquiringly.

"Not quite so far," replied the lawyer. "The institution is a private one and has been well patronized for a number of years."

"If Miss Langdon has been really placed in an asylum it must be that of Doctor Julliard. I was about to start out to trace the carriage, but that seems hardly necessary."

"No, the trail is very warm without it."

"Shall we go to Judge Durham again?"

"Yes, but hold on!" suddenly added the lawyer checking himself; "we are confronted by a curious condition of affairs."

"In what respect?"

"Brandon lies in one county and Doctor Julliard's Asylum in another."

"Are the districts of the Supreme Court Judges limited to single counties?"

"Not at all; each Justice has a certain district which in some instances is composed of several counties. In this case, when we cross over into the neighboring county, where Doctor Julliard has labored so long for unfortunate humanity, we shall enter the jurisdiction of Judge Hoborne."

"What of it?"

"He is a very different sort of man from Judge Durham."

"Is he less accessible?"

"He is crusty, crabbed and at times excessively disagreeable; more than likely he will refuse to order the writ of *habeas corpus*."

"It will not settle the case if he does."

"Why not?"

"I am determined that Miss Langdon shall come out of that infernal place, no matter what the cost."

"It is a dangerous thing to array yourself against the law."

"I am desperate and cannot help it."

"Wait till we see Judge Hoborne."

Lawyer and client made their way to the residence of the official who was found engaged in court.

As soon as lawyer Maggiore could gain his ear, he made the request for him to issue the writ of *habeas corpus*.

It so happened that the judge was in one of his ugliest moods.

He listened impatiently to the statement of the case by the counselor.

When he was through he asked him whether he was certain the young lady was in Doctor Julliard's Asylum.

The lawyer could not speak positively, but he expressed himself as having no doubt on the matter.

The judge gave a grunt of disgust, and bade him go and find out before he approached him with such a request.

"It's infernally provoking," said the red-

faced counselor, "but the judge is right after all."

"What's to be done now?"

"We go to Doctor Julliard's."

Accordingly they made all haste thither. They reached the institution in the afternoon.

They found evidence of much excitement. Plainly something had occurred of an unusual nature.

But the superintendent himself was on the spot, and, when asked whether he had a patient of the name of Miss Ethel Langdon, he answered:

"I had, that is, until some time in the small hours of this morning."

"Is she not here now?"

"I regret to inform you that she escaped."

"Alone?" asked the breathless lover.

"I am sorry to say she was in the company of one of my most dangerous lunatics."

"Have you searched for her?"

"Every possible effort has been made and is being made; I have more than twenty persons hunting for her."

"Have no tidings been gained?"

"The last report was that not the first clew had been obtained of either."

"But they must be found."

"Undoubtedly they will. I am looking for news every minute. It is impossible for them to keep out of sight much longer."

"Did you say the companion of Miss Ethel is a dangerous patient?"

"We have no more dangerous one in the institution."

"In what respect?"

"She is quiet and rational at times, and then she becomes very violent—her mania being a desire to kill those around her."

As may be supposed, this was alarming news to Brayton Russell, who, after asking a few more questions, set out with the determination to join in the hunt for his beloved.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A FAMILY COUNCIL.

MISS HANNAH HAHLO and Ethel Langdon overheard the conversation between Jake Calkins and the two men who stopped at the door to inquire for them.

When they had departed, Hannah came into the room.

She looked at the amazing falsifier with admiration.

"You did that well," said she. "I feel safe so long as you are sentinel on the outer walls."

Calkins was delighted.

It was his belief that this lady was in her right mind, while Miss Langdon was clean daft, in spite of her ladylike deportment.

Besides, it may as well be confessed, the susceptible Jerseyman was very much impressed with the attractiveness of Miss Hahlo.

Of course, he could not fail to note that the other was remarkably beautiful.

But she manifested no interest in him.

True, Jacob had a good, faithful wife awaiting his return down in the fragrant Pines.

But he intended her no serious wrong when he made up his mind to pass off himself for a young, unmarried man in the presence of this lady, who showed she was struck by his winsome looks and manner.

"I did that all for your sake," said he, with an enormous grin of pleasure.

"I must thank you then," said she, extending her small hand, which Jake caught and pressed warmly.

John Burrage and his wife (who was the sister of Jake) saw how matters were going and they felt disposed to help them along.

For greater security, the curtains were now drawn and the key was turned in the door.

Then all sat down to the breakfast-table.

No stranger, dropping in at that moment, could have suspected that either one of the lady guests was not in her right mind.

"We must be very careful," said the head of the house, "for the folks will be hunting around us all day."

"I shall take good care to guard the young ladies, specially Miss Hahlo," remarked Jake with a smirk and expressive glance toward the lady.

The latter smiled sweetly in return.

"I shall feel safe, so long as I have you to protect me."

Ethel saw how matters were going and she rather welcomed it as a relief to the nervous strain under which she had been suffering so long.

Jake Calkins almost choked with bliss on hearing himself addressed in this fashion.

He coughed so violently that part of the potato in his mouth was flung across the room.

"Jacob was always very brave and ready in defending female helplessness," remarked his sister.

"You are correct, Matilda," responded the grateful fellow; "you know I was that way when I was a boy at school."

"Yes, and it seems to have grown onto you as you got older," added Jacob's brother-in-law.

"I tell you if there's one thing that riles me," observed Jake, trying to spread his bread with his fork, "it's to see any one 'lusing a lovely female. My wife—that is, all my 'quaintances will swear to that, till everything is blue."

"Jacob, how old are you?"

The question was asked by Hannah Hahlo, who sat directly opposite the foolish fellow.

"Twenty-four, next fourth of July."

In truth, he was very nearly double that age, and every one at the table knew it.

"How well you carry your years!"

This, it is scarcely necessary to say, was uttered by the same lady who asked the question.

She was pressing Jake hard and he was too verdant to suspect it.

"Do you really think so?" he asked, with another smirk.

"There can be no doubt of it."

"I allers took good care of myself; never smoked, chewed terbacker, drunk whisky or stayed up late nights."

"You forget last night," suggested Ethel Langdon.

"I mean as a reg'lar diet," Jake Calkins hastened to say, fully convinced that Miss Langdon was the insane guest.

Furthermore, he saw she was becoming very jealous of him.

He couldn't be blamed for being handsome and attractive.

"I don't suppose, Jacob, you really know what fear is?" insinuated Miss Hahlo.

"Wal, it ain't for me to talk 'bout myself, but that's just what I've heard about ten thousand times; from them as knowed me all my life. Twenty years ago I killed three b'ars in Jersey in a rough-and-tumble fight—Great thunder!"

Just then there came a resounding knock on the door, which startled every one.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A LADY AND HER ADMIRER.

THE conversation ceased on the instant.

Ethel Langdon and Hannah Hahlo sprang up from their seats and slipped noiselessly into the sitting-room, where they placed themselves beyond sight of any one at the door.

Mrs. Burrage with some confusion of manner, answered the knock.

A large man stood there, with his face screwed up into a very interrogation point.

"I am Doctor Adonijah Bell," said he, by way of introducing himself; "Doctor Thompson and myself sent a female lunatic to Doctor Julliard's Asylum, day before yesterday."

"Yes, sir," meekly replied Mrs. Burrage, not feeling called upon to say anything else.

Calkins and the husband suspended eating their meal, and listened carefully.

"That young lady is missing."

"Yes, sir."

"I am looking for her."

"Yes, sir."

"Can you tell me where she is, madam?"

"Yes—that is, I'll ask my brother—"

She turned appealingly toward Jake Calkins, who felt that the occasion demanded a statesman like himself.

Shoving back his chair with such suddenness that it fell over, he strode to the door.

"What do you want, sir?"

He spoke with the voice and manner of a general on the field.

"I am looking for Miss Ethel Langdon."

"I've no objection to your looking all you want to!"

"Can you tell me anything about her?"

"Not a blamed thing."

"Has any one been here looking for her?"

With no little impressiveness, Jake took a bulky note book from his pocket.

He examined some of the memoranda a moment and said:

"You are the one hundred and ninety-fourth caller that has been here this morning."

"Is it possible?"

"Yes, and there are several that I didn't count; I've arranged to have a sign painted and stuck up in front of my house, notifying the public that we ain't keeping any stock of crazy runaways."

"Indeed; you are disposed to be facetious; good day, sir."

"Good-day; when you are on your way back, stop and inquire again; you'll be likely to forget you've called by that time."

Jake banged the door shut with more emphasis than was necessary and resumed his seat at the table.

"As I's saying," he resumed, "when I was a little boy, I killed five wild bears in a rough-and-tumble fight; I hadn't any sort of weapon but a toothpick that I had made myself."

"And you killed them all?" repeated Hannah Hahlo, who, like Ethel, glanced nervously toward the door.

"Not one was left to tell the tale; oh, I'm vengeance when I'm once roused. If that fellow who called himself Doctor Bell hadn't slid out jest as he did, I would have shet up his clapper forever."

And the valiant Calkins smiled at his own wit.

As may be supposed, Ethel Langdon felt in anything but a mirthful mood, after the visit of the man who had assisted to abduct her from her home but a short time before.

"Why has he come here?" she asked herself; "is he to torment me continually? He has caused me enough suffering already, without attempting to prevent me getting my freedom."

But Jake Calkins was in high feather, and rattled on in his wild fashion during the entire meal.

Convinced that he was making an excellent impression on the charming Miss Hahlo, he became more reckless in his statements than usual.

It never occurred to him that every one of his listeners saw through the absurd farce in which he was playing the clown.

The most absolute fool is an old fool.

Jake Calkins proved it again and again.

His attempt to pass himself off as a gallant young man, on the lookout for some eligible lady, was a comedy of itself.

"My dear Miss Hahlo," said he, when the long morning meal was finished, "will you not take a stroll with me through the arboreal woods?"

All looked up in astonishment, not so much at his original adjective as at the proposal itself.

"That'll never do, Jake," said his sister.

"And why not, I should like to know?"

"Doctor Julliard's men are everywhere, and they would be certain to discover you."

"I think not; but what if they do?" he asked, grandiloquently; "I shall consider it an auriferous boon to have the privilege of defending Miss Hahlo against the minions of the law."

It really seemed that the fellow's head was becoming turned with his absurd fancy.

The rest of the company looked at Hannah Hahlo.

Of course she would not consent.

Nevertheless she did.

"I will go with Mr. Calkins with pleasure; I shall not be afraid that he will not take good care of me."

"Noble lady, thy faith is not misplaced," said Jake, seeming to grow several inches in stature on the moment.

John Burrage was glad the proposition was accepted.

He considered it certain that Hannah Hahlo would fall into the hands of some of the keepers within a brief while.

By evening she would be safely lodged in the asylum, from which she should never have been permitted to escape.

True, her recapture would endanger the safety of the other lady, in whose sanity he had come thoroughly to believe.

Besides it would compromise himself, for he had been a party to a deception which was likely to involve him in trouble.

But matters had gone so far that an expose must come sooner or later, and he would be glad to be relieved of the worryment it already caused him.

He therefore encouraged the absurd proposal of Jake Calkins to take the lady out for a stroll, when he considered it absolutely certain that she would be discovered within an hour or two at the most.

about her imagined.

She saw one or two things which had escaped the eye of Ethel Langdon even.

It was her wish to get out of the house with as little delay as possible.

Still she was too cunning to use the front door, and walk directly into the trap that might be waiting.

First of all a careful reconnoissance was made.

The coast seemed to be clear.

Instead of passing out the front, the two went through the rear door, making their way by a circuitous route, to a long stretch of woods, which was a favorite resort for picnic parties and strolling lovers.

Had any one been watching Hannah Hahlo closely, he would have seen the old dangerous light coming back into her eyes.

She was nearing one of her violent turns, which was liable to take any form.

Before she set out with her admirer, she made sure that the needle pointed wire was in her pocket, where she could grasp it the very instant she might want to use the terrible weapon.

CHAPTER XL.

DOCTOR ADONIJAH BELL MAKES A DISCOVERY.

THE reader has learned enough of Doctor Adonijah Bell to know that he and his associate, Doctor Darius Thompson, were two first-class scoundrels.

Both possessed a good medical education, but they were dissipated, and ready to engage in any enterprise, no matter how questionable, that promised them suitable compensation.

Consequently they were the very tools which Algol Langdon, the Winking Demon, required to carry out his infamous scheme in placing his niece in a lunatic asylum.

The terms on which this diabolical plot was arranged have already been made known.

With the additional funds which Doctor Thompson thus gained, he started at once for New York city, his purpose being to engage upon "a racket" until not a penny was left.

Doctor Bell was more sensible.

He concluded on the second day to drive over to Doctor Julliard's institution, and take a look at his patient.

He had no thought of anything going amiss, but it would look as though he was conscientiously anxious to earn the rather liberal salary his employer had engaged to give him.

After visiting the lady patient, he would take the cars to Ardville, report to Mr. Langdon and secure another installment.

It would show the latter that he was alive and attentive to his duty.

Doctor Bell reached the asylum on horseback at an early hour, previous in fact to the call of Brayton Russell.

His astonishment and indignation on learning of the flight of Miss Langdon may be fancied.

He denounced Doctor Julliard savagely and threatened to make known the rotten character of his institution, from one end of the country to the other.

The superintendent accepted the castigation meekly, for he could not but admit that he deserved it.

He assured his angered patron that the lady would undoubtedly be recovered in a short time, and he would make certain that nothing of the kind should occur again.

The irate visitor replied that such assurance was unnecessary, as he would take care that the lady was placed in an institution where some attention and care would be shown her.

Ignoring this significant threat, the superintendent told the doctor that he had promised fifty dollars to the one who brought back either Miss Langdon or Hahlo, or seventy-five dollars for both.

The doctor continued to denounce the derelict superintendent several minutes, and then mounting his horse rode away.

But the announcement of the reward offered had aroused his cupidity and he resolved to earn a part or all of it.

The sum was a handsome one and much more than the superintendent usually offered.

Doctor Bell rode to the summit of the nearest hill, where he reined up his horse and took a survey of the surrounding country.

He was like a hunter who looks over the territory before him, that he may determine the most likely place to find the game for which he is hunting.

"There are so many of them searching for the two patients," he muttered, after completing his survey, "that I don't suppose I have much chance of finding either."

He waited awhile longer and then compressed his lips.

"I'll try it anyway, but what's the use of attempting to form any plan? There is no calculating what whim will take possession of a crazy person's mind, only in this case, the particular lady which I want, isn't crazy at all. But she is with a violent one, who if she does not kill her, will lead her wheresoever she chooses."

Finally his eye rested on the humble home of John Burrage not far away.

"I will be as thorough as I can and will begin there."

He galloped to the large gate, dismounted and walked to the front door, where he knocked, without molestation from the dog.

We have already given an account of the interview which he held with Mrs. Burrage and her brother.

He was bluffed off in the most emphatic manner.

But rascally Doctor Bell was anything but a stupid man.

While holding the brief converse at the door, he used his eyes for all they were worth.

He observed that there were five plates on the table, while only three persons were visible.

His quick eye also detected a single kid glove lying on the floor of the sitting-room.

Imperfect as was his view of it, he was able to decide that it was of too slight and delicate pattern to cover the brawny hands of Mrs. Burrage.

The inquirer took all this in and drew his own conclusion.

When Hannah Hable resumed her place at the table, she noticed the same tell-tale tokens.

Insane though she was, she did that which none of her sane companions did.

She decided that the visitor must have observed them and consequently learned that the fugitives from the asylum were being sheltered there.

The cunning lady never gave a hint of her convictions, but kept her own counsel.

This will explain why she consented so readily to take the stroll with Jake Calkins.

When she left the house, it was her determination not to return.

She believed some of the attendants would be there within the succeeding half-hour.

Doctor Bell, as we have stated, satisfied himself that the ladies for whom he was hunting were in the house of the farmer where he first halted.

But it was a fair conclusion that if they would deceive him, they would resist his attempt to take them back to the asylum.

"It won't do for me to undertake the business alone," he concluded on his way from the building; "they will make a fight and likely enough I will be hardly used."

But, if he should call in the assistance of others, he would be compelled to divide with them, and that was something to which the doctor was opposed on principle.

He withdrew to a point from which he could hold the little building under surveillance, while he meditated on the best course to pursue.

He was worried by the belief that if he waited long before taking the ladies, or at least one of them, some one else would come along and scoop in the prize.

While he was watching the building, he saw two persons emerge from the rear door.

A second glance showed them to be a man and woman.

At the distance it was impossible to identify them, but he became suspicious at once.

"They have become alarmed," he concluded; "they find the hunt is becoming too warm, and they're going to remove Miss Langdon while they have a chance to do so."

As there were but two men in the house when the doctor made his call, it was easy to decide which of the two was escorting the lady, inasmuch as there was a marked contrast between the appearance of John Burrage and his brother-in-law.

It was impossible to decide between the ladies, as he had never seen one of them and knew very little of the other.

He was quite convinced, however, that he was looking upon Miss Langdon and her friend.

Noticing the course taken by them, he chose a circuitous path with a view of heading them off.

The doctor carried a pistol, but he had no thought of using it, except, possibly, to intimidate some one.

When he should confront the escort, he did not think the fellow would dare disregard his command to surrender the lady.

It required considerable time for the physician to secure the point for which he was aiming, and when he succeeded, the man and woman had been out of sight for fully twenty minutes.

Dismounting and tying his horse, he began a more careful hunt for them, but was annoyed by his failure to obtain the least trace whither they had gone.

As the woods were not of great extent, he was sure they had not passed through them, but were in hiding at no distant point from where he stood.

Suddenly he fancied he detected the murmur of voices.

Instantly he began picking his way toward the point whence it came.

He had nearly reached the spot, when he halted with a curious expression on his face.

"What in the name of the Seven Wonders does *that* mean?" he asked himself.

He took several more steps forward, and then halted more abruptly than before.

His face turned white and his hair fairly rose on end.

"Great Heaven!" he gasped; "what shall I do?"

CHAPTER XLI.

WHAT THE MATTER WAS WITH HANNAH.

MR. JACOB CALKINS was certain that the young lady whom he had taken out for a stroll was one of the most entertaining and attractive of her sex.

He exerted himself to the utmost to deepen the interest he was sure he had already excited in her.

He talked so continuously and glibly that he paid no heed whither he conducted her.

But she looked after that important matter herself, and permitted him to talk to his heart's content.

"I think you told me you lived in the Pines," said she, glancing slyly at him, while she kept a sharp watch for any other parties who might appear in the neighborhood.

"I do a part of the time," he said. "I have to spend a few weeks here each season to look after my farms."

"Have you more than one?"

"I have seven and have been trying to buy four more."

"Are they very large?"

"Each contains more than a thousand acres."

"Why you must be quite wealthy."

"Jewhikakens! that's nothing; didn't you ever hear about my summer residence along the Hudson?"

"Why, no; have you one?"

"I've got a ripper; the greenhouse cost me fifty thousand dollars alone."

Miss Hable looked upon the speaker as though she was unable to give expression to her feelings.

"Yes; then I've got a city residence in New York and Philadelphia. When I get married I'm going to let my wife take her choice; *that's* the kind of hair-pin I am."

"It seems to me that if you are so wealthy, you would do something for your brother-in-law."

"That's jes' what I came here for!" exclaimed Jake enthusiastically; "I was arranging with John to take a farm over in Pennsylvania; there's n thing mean about me; I allers go the whole hog—"

Just then Jake caught his toe in a twisted root and went sprawling forward on his hands and knees.

The lady laughed outright at the ridiculous figure he made, and he hastily scrambled to his feet, very red in the face.

"Gosh hang that blamed root!" he growled, brushing the dirt from the knees of his trousers. "I never swear, but I feel all-firedly like it now."

"Here's a rustic seat; suppose we sit down awhile."

"The idee exactly," said the delighted Jake, hastening to place himself beside the interesting lady.

She now looked squarely in his face and said:

"Tell me, Mr. Calkins—"

"Oh don't," he interrupted, "call me Jake, or better Jakey."

"Well, Jakey, answer me truly; did you ever tell a falsehood?"

"NEVER!"

Not the slightest blush darkened his countenance as he made this prompt response.

"But you said at the house that you bore the reputation of being the greatest falsifier in your part of the country."

"That was only a jest, of course; I thought you understood that."

"Suppose they should come to carry me back to the asylum by force, what would you do?"

"I only beg the chance to show 'em; *that's* all."

As Jake Calkins uttered these boastful words, he reached out to take the hand of the lady.

She allowed him to do so, but when his palm touched hers, he jerked it back with an exclamation of pain.

"What in thunder is that?" he demanded, looking at his finger, which felt as if a needle had been thrust half-way through it.

Hannah Hable smiled sweetly but did not permit him to see the stiletto-like wire she had concealed in her sleeve and the palm of her hand.

"Jakey, do you know who I am?"

"You're the sweetest, smartest, purtiest woman in the whole creation," was the chivalrous response.

"That is all true, but I have a title; have you ever heard it?"

"No," he replied wonderingly.

"It is the Queen of the Cannibal Islands."

"That's a darned funny title," remarked Jake Calkins, a little puzzled to understand what she meant.

"You shouldn't speak so disrespectfully of a queen," said she, in a voice of unmistakable displeasure.

"How long have you been Queen of the Carnsveral Islands?"

"Two hundred years," was the amazing response.

"I thought you was younger than that."

"And you want to be king, don't you?"

"I wouldn't mind, if the wages was good," said Jake, grinning over what he thought was a pretty fair joke.

"But you shan't be king."

"Why not?"

"For then you wouldn't be willing for me to rule."

"From your style I should say it wouldn't make much difference whether I was willin' or not."

"There isn't room for a king and queen in the same kingdom."

"Then one of us would have to get out, wouldn't he?"

Up to this time Jake Calkins had not entertained a thought of the true condition of affairs. But now a faint suspicion entered his mind.

His companion was not acting as heretofore.

There was an intensity—so to speak—in her manner which arrested his notice.

Again, when he caught her eyes, he observed a strange glitter in them, which caused him to ask himself the question:

"Is it possible that *this* lady is the one who has lost her mind? I'll be hanged if it doesn't begin to look that way."

He wished that he was back in the house of his brother-in-law, or what was better, with his good wife, down in the Jersey Pines.

"I think we had better return," he remarked, rising from the rustic seat.

"Sit down!" she commanded, so imperiously that he dropped back again as though some one had knocked his feet from under him.

"Do you know I am Queen of the Cannibal Islands?"

"Certainly; I've always knowed it," replied Jake, unable to resist his propensity to misrepresent matters.

"And you are my subject?"

"Of course, of course."

"Then get down on your knees before me!"

"But I would—"

"Get down, I say!"

"But it will dirty my pants, and my wife—"

"Down! do you hear?"

And she raised her needle-like stiletto aloft, ready to plunge it into his body.

Jake saw the strange weapon, and it filled him with terror.

"What's the use of gettin' so blamed mad about nothin'? Nobody hain't said nothin'—"

The lunatic, her face aflame with passion, showed such a determination to force matters, that Calkins did not dare dally longer.

Sliding off his seat, he dropped upon his knees and clasped his hands in an imploring attitude.

"Beautiful King of Canteen Islands—"

"I am queen, not king!"

"Beautiful king, I mean—"

"Do you acknowledge me such?"

"Of course I do."

"Then you are ready to die!"

She swept toward him with her uplifted weapon, and Jake managed to save himself only by a very narrow chance.

Leaping to his feet, he bounded away at the highest bent of his speed, shouting in a hoarse voice:

"Murder! murder! mur—"

Just then a projecting limb caught him beneath the chin and almost lifted him off his feet.

He felt that his last minute had come.

Such most probably would have been the case, had not a third person appeared on the scene at that instant.

This third person was Dr. Adonijah Bell, who, as may be supposed, was never more amazed in all his life.

CHAPTER XLII.

IN SUSPENSE.

MRS. BURRAGE and her husband indulged in a quiet laugh, after the departure of Jake Calkins from the house, in the company of Hannah Hablo.

It was manifest to the three that the relative believed fully in her sanity.

"When I see Jake's wife, I'll tell her about this gallivantin' of his and she will haul him over the coals," said his sister.

"I'm afraid Hannah will do it herself," observed Ethel.

"I hope so," snapped the wife, who felt little charity for such foolishness on the part of her brother.

"I consider it certain that she will be seen and taken in charge by some of the attendants," said Ethel.

"It is impossible for her to prevent it."

"And then what will become of me?" was the natural inquiry of our heroine.

"She may not betray you, but, if they corner Jake, as they will be pretty sartin to do, he will give you dead away."

"See here," remarked Mrs. Burrage; "you do not believe you can keep out of their way long, do you?"

"I confess I had hope of doing so."

"It's impossible; why not give yourself up?"

"Do you or your husband believe I am crazy?"

She looked from one to the other, but both were prompt in making answer.

"I haven't seen the first sign of it; whether you've been so or not we don't know."

"I have never shown any more evidence of it than you see this minute."

"If that's so," said John Burrage; "you won't have any trouble in proving it."

"I certainly ought not to have any trouble, but if they could place me in there, in the first place, what is to prevent them keeping me there?"

The question was a hard one to answer.

"That man who called here only a little while ago—Dr. Bell—is one of the physicians who did it, as he told you; but I have succeeded in doing one thing," added Ethel, her face aglow.

"What's that?"

"I've sent word to one who will fly to my assistance; did you mail that letter, when you went out a short time ago?"

"Yes—that is I think I did," replied John Burrage with some embarrassment; "I know I meant to do so."

He began a hurried examination through the pockets of his garments, and nothing could surpass the sheepishness of his countenance, when he produced the identical letter which he had started out to mail, immediately after breakfast.

"I'll be darned!" he exclaimed, looking ruefully at the plump envelope; "do you know how I come to do that?"

"Forgot it, of course, like you always do," replied his wife, twofold more angry than was her guest.

"I mailed Mr. Calkins, the postman, that letter of yours in the place of it."

"What letter of mine?"

"That one to your mother which you wrote the other day."

"Wrote the other day!" repeated the indignant wife; "I wrote it more than two weeks ago and I was in a hurry about it and you promised that—"

But Mr. Burrage, finding what a hornet's nest he had raised about his ears, hastened out of the house.

The corner post-office, from which the mail was forwarded to the nearest railroad station, was but a short distance off, and there was no reason why the forgetfulness of Mr. Burrage should cause delay of any account.

"You see," said Mrs. Burrage, when they were left alone and she had expressed herself pretty vigorously respecting the carelessness of her husband, "your letter goes to Ardville, which is only a short distance off; your friend will get it pretty soon and then I suppose he will lose no time in hastening here."

"Indeed he will," was the confident response of the maiden; "he cannot delay his coming later than to-morrow."

"Then why not go back to the asylum? He can go there after you and it will not take him long to prove you ain't crazy."

"I do not know as I would have any very great objection, after establishing such relations with you as I have; but I have written to him that I am at your house and asked him to come here for me."

"It's only a short distance to the doctor's."

"But there will be delay in compelling Doctor Julliard to release me, while it will be impossible to get me in the asylum again after Brayton has found me."

Plainly Ethel Langdon had much more confidence in the prowess of her lover than did the woman with whom she was holding conversation.

"If you choose to stay here, you are welcome, but I must say it will be hardly less than a miracle, if you are not taken away before the sun goes down."

"Possibly Brayton may learn where I am long before my letter reaches him," said Ethel, looking to the door, as though she expected to hear his knock and familiar footfall.

"I hope so," observed the woman, who could not contemplate without misgiving the scene that was likely to take place within that same room should the friends and enemies of the beautiful lady arrive there at the same time.

"Whatever the result of this painful experience," said Ethel, "my gratitude to you and your kind husband will always be the same and shall never be forgotten."

CHAPTER XLIII.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

It will be remembered that Orson Oxx, the Man of Iron, had his flurry with the Winking Demon at the hour of ten in the morning.

It was on the same day that Hannah Hablo and Ethel Langdon fled from Doctor Julliard's Private Asylum for the Insane.

Had it been possible or even probable to secure the punishment of the miscreant for the crimes already committed, he would have hustled him off to jail without delay.

But, though morally certain of the guilt of Langdon, Orson Oxx knew that the hour had not yet come for him to strike.

Grand and petit juries feel a prejudice, as a rule, against detectives and their methods, and the judges on the bench frequently bear down very heavily upon them.

This prejudice, united to the lack of tangible proof, would weaken the case of Oxx beyond repair.

He knew, too, that after his savage treatment of Langdon and Yelland, it would not do for him to linger in the vicinity.

In such a small place as Ardville, where every one was known, it would be almost impossible to disguise himself so as to deceive a number of those with whom he had come in such emphatic contact.

He might do it in the night time, but on this clear day in autumn he could not hope to escape suspicion.

Besides there was no reason why he should loiter in the vicinity, awaiting the time when the Winking Demon should take it into his head to indulge in the conflagration amusement again.

Accordingly, after leaving the Homestead, he hastened from the vicinity.

When he reached the highway, he made one of his lightning changes of appearance.

It was enough to answer for ordinary purposes, but it would not have passed the scrutiny of a certain individual with one eye, under the full light of the sun.

Good fortune attended him, for he was overtaken by a gentleman in a carriage, who invited him to ride. By this means he reached Ardville much sooner than if he had walked the distance, slight as it was.

He knew that Algol Langdon and Shadrach Yelland would take prompt means to secure his arrest on a pretty clear case of aggravated assault.

He resolved, in case no train was due, to walk to the next station and board the cars, where he would not be likely to excite suspicion in his pursuers. But, as the carriage halted, he observed a train at the depot.

Thanking his friend, he leaped out and sprung upon the car, just as it was moving away. He had no time to buy a ticket and the brakeman attempted in vain to keep him off.

When the train reached the next station, two men entered and walked through from one end to the other.

They scrutinized each passenger as they did so.

Orson Oxx saw them come in and knew what it meant.

Algol Langdon had telegraphed ahead asking for the arrest of a certain person whom he described.

These were officers searching the train for the criminal.

Orson Oxx was leaning against the window, seemingly sound asleep.

His under jaw was hanging down and he was breathing heavily.

All the same, he kept a close watch on the officers.

Each one looked at him sharply, but not in a way to show they held any suspicion that he was the one they wanted.

The Man of Iron was in the last car, and, as they had failed to find him, they scrutinized each passenger more closely.

After passing to the rear, they turned about and looked back.

"He don't seem to be here," one remarked.

"No; he has given us the slip."

"There's one passenger I suspect."

"Which one?"

"That fellow sitting near the middle, on the right hand side."

This was locating Orson Oxx quite accurately, and he believed trouble was at hand.

"I see him."

"He is that big fellow trying to look so innocent."

"Let's go for him."

They moved forward, but, instead of disturbing Oxx, touched the man in front of him.

When he looked up, one of the officers immediately apologized; he recognized him as Reverend Jabez Walker, D. D.

By this time, the train was in motion again, and the officers were forced to leap off.

Shortly after, Orson Oxx left the cars at Brandon.

He was without any knowledge of the name of the asylum where Ethel Langdon had been taken, and, as a matter of course, he knew nothing about her flight.

He had learned, however, during his interview of the night before, that she was not at the Brandon institution.

By a run of good fortune, he encountered a gentleman attached to Doctor Julliard's private asylum, who was in Brandon making inquiries for the missing ladies.

From him the detective ascertained the fact of their flight, and of the extended search that was being prosecuted for them.

This individual was convinced that the two had not been in Brandon, and he was about to drive home in his carriage.

He willingly took Orson Oxx with him, supposing him to be an innocent gentleman belonging in that neighborhood.

Thus, by a combination of circumstances, the Man of Iron was brought upon the stage of action whither most of the parties in whom we have an interest were concentrating, preparatory to the closing scenes of the drama.

It was early in the afternoon, when Oxx called at the asylum of Doctor Julliard and found the superintendent somewhat testy and

out of sorts, because so many hours had slipped by without bringing him any definite tidings of the missing patients.

Orson was a verdant-looking farmer, who was treated rather pleasantly at first, on the supposition that he brought encouraging news.

When Doctor Julliard found he was in quest of information and had none to impart, he turned his back upon him, and acted so crustily that the inquirer departed without learning anything more of the all-absorbing matter.

In fact, Orson Oxx knew all that could have been told him.

"The whole neighborhood seems to be engaged in hunting two women," said he to himself, "and I may as well strike in on the chorus."

A surprise awaited him.

He had not gone far, when he encountered a person of dilapidated appearance but whose face was not altogether unfamiliar to him.

A second glance showed that it was his old acquaintance Jake Calkins, whom he had not seen since his adventures with him in the Pines of New Jersey.

The gentleman was walking very rapidly in the direction of Doctor Julliard's Asylum.

"Where are you going?" asked Orson stopping in front of him.

"I don't know that it's any of your confounded business," replied the countryman, who was in bad humor.

He looked at the farmer in his spectacles, dusty clothes and with his big hickory cane and thought it a piece of presumption for him to stop him in that fashion.

"What's the use of bein' so techy?" asked the farmer; "I only axed you a civil question."

"I don't consider it civil; I once had an old farmer stop me in that fashion and I laid him out, so he had to keep his bed for a month; it's mighty dangerous to rile me; I'm Vengeance on horse-back."

"Ln, sakes! you don't say so; where was that?"

"Down in Freehold, near where I live."

"And you pummeled him did you?"

"You can jes' bet your sweet life I did."

"What for?"

"Cause he axed too many questions."

"What did you do with him?"

"Took him by the heels and banged all the railings out of the fence with his head."

"Heavens o' nath! wasn't that a little rough?"

"Of course it was, but that's the kind of chap I am; things hain't gone right with me and I'm cross; I have just been layin' out three men that were too blamed sassy."

"What was the name of the old feller you used so rough in Freehold?"

"He called himself Tom Tumbrell from Barnegat."

"That's mighty queer; didn't you know, Jake Calkins, that I am farmer Tom Tumbrell from Barnegat?"

CHAPTER XLIV.

TWO FRIENDS JOIN FORCES.

The face of Jake Calkins instantly became a study for a painter.

He gasped, recoiled a step, looked hard at the honest countenance, and then recognized the man before him.

It was the great detective who had trounced him so soundly, and whom he held in such exalted estimation.

He instantly emitted a shout which sounded like an Indian war-whoop, sprung across the intervening space, and caught the hand of Orson Oxx in his frenzied grip.

"By the great Jehohilakens! It is you, and no mistake! You've got to go right home with me and spend the winter! Where in the name of the jumping Jehosaphat did you come from?"

Orson Oxx broke into hearty laughter, for the scene was comical beyond description.

He liked Jake Calkins, despite his personal unreliability, and was really pleased to meet him in this unexpected fashion.

He shook his hand warmly, and said that he had just reached the neighborhood on some business for a friend.

He took care, however, to mention no names.

Jake listened with open mouth, and when questioned as to the explanation of his being so far away from home, made answer that he was paying a visit to his brother-in-law, John Burrage, who was living near at hand.

"But where are you going?"

"Home."

"What for?"

"I'm disgusted with this country," was the reply, as Jake took off his hat, and scratched his head.

"But I thought you were aiming for the asylum?"

"So I was."

"What business have you there?"

"I've been thinking about lockin' myself up for a year or two till I can git some sense."

"I'm afraid you will have to make it a life term, Jake."

"You're right, old friend! Shake!"

He extended his hand once more with much enthusiasm.

"Come, now, Jake," said Orson Oxx, in that persuasive way which he often used with great effect; "be honest, and tell me the truth."

"They say it is hard work for me to give the facts; but I like you, Mr. Oxx, and you shall have 'em."

"I am waiting to hear them."

"I was taking a stroll with a lady some time ago, and was sorter talking sweet to her (you mustn't give me away to the old woman when you go home with me), and everything was going lovely, when she told me she was the Queen of the Cinnamon Islands, and came darned near killing me."

Oxx laughed again, and asked:

"In what way did she try to kill you?"

"She had a wire as sharp as a needle, which she tried to run through me. I just managed to get away from her before she turned me into a pin-cushion."

"Did she chase you?"

"She started to do so, when another chap sprung up from the ground and she went for him."

"What did you do?"

"I kept on running for home; I s'pose I didn't look much like myself, for when I got purty near the house, my brother-in-law's dog Bowser came for me like a runaway locomotive and—well, that's why I've had to pin up my breeches and walk so careful like."

"How long ago was that?"

"Early this forenoon; it made me so infarnal mad that I wouldn't go home and have been wandering 'round the country, waiting for night to come, so I can sneak in the back way and git my sister to take some stitches in my clothes."

"But why did this lady treat you so cavalierly? Did you insult her?"

"I never dreamed of such a thing."

"She must have been crazy."

"Now you're shouting; that's what the matter was with Hannah."

"Who was she?"

"Miss Hannah Hahlo."

Orson Oxx recognized the name at once as that of the lady, who he had been told, fled with Miss Ethel Langdon.

He asked for further particulars and received them.

"Why were you going to the asylum?"

"I was going to tell Doctor Julliard where his crazy women are. I would have to call him outside, on account of what Bowser did."

"Do you know where the other lady is?"

"Do you mean Miss Langdon?"

"I do."

"She and Miss Hahlo came to our house—that is where I am visiting—late last night, and, when I started out for a stroll, with Miss Hahlo, I left the other behind."

"Why, that's the very person I am looking for."

"You don't tell me: I'm glad you met me."

"I want you to show me the way to your relative's house."

"I will, but you understand you'll have to excuse me, or maybe you can git my sister to send me a pair of trousers of her husband by you."

"I will see that you are provided for in that respect."

The two started off together, both in good spirits.

"From what you have told me, Jake, the young lady who turned upon you in such an unreasonable manner is a real lunatic."

"I should smile, by a large majority."

"But the other is not."

"I think you are right; for John Burrage, my brother-in-law, said that one of 'em was all right, but the deuce of it was I got the wrong one and they put up the job on me."

"It was hardly the fair thing for them to do; now, I think respecting Miss Hahlo—"

"Great thunder! there she comes this minute!" exclaimed Jake Calkins, with a gasp, catching the arm of the detective.

CHAPTER XLV.

A COOL HEAD AND A STRONG ARM.

DOCTOR ADONIJAH BELL came upon Jake Calkins and Miss Hannah Hahlo at the crisis of their interview.

He saw the "previous" countryman dash through the wood at the top of his speed, and escape assassination as narrowly as if he were the Czar of the Russias.

Then, by the fates of war, the physician became the substitute of the ardent swain.

As the latter rushed by and got away, the lady with the disordered mind turned upon the doctor.

"What are you doing here?"

"I ain't here; I am *there*," was the instant response of the doctor, who turned about and ran like a deer.

"I didn't come out to capture raving thunderbolts," was his conclusion, when, after speeding several hundred yards, he paused panting, and, looking behind him, was gratified to find he was not pursued.

He stole back softly to catch sight of the woman and learn what she was doing, but several minutes' search failed to discover her.

"There's one thing certain," added the discomfited doctor, "I don't intend to work for the whole reward offered by the superintendent. I'll now go for the other woman. Inasmuch as she is of sound mind, she will not conduct herself in such an unladylike fashion and I can argue the matter with her; and, maybe," he thought, a few minutes later, "that will be just where I'll miss it."

It would be a strange and interesting picture could we tell what singular vagaries governed the brain of the unfortunate lady, Miss Hahlo, who had driven two men in such terror from her presence.

There were many hours when there seemed nothing at all the matter with her, and then, with scarcely any warning, she became uncontrollable.

Having driven the parties from before her, she withdrew to the shelter of the wood, that she might avoid those who she believed would soon be searching that neighborhood for her.

Waiting a long time, and they failing to appear, she moved forward with a view of learning whether it would be safe for her to venture forth.

Suddenly she came upon Orson Oxx and Jake Calkins.

She must have thought that the loving countryman had brought the other party to assist in her arrest.

At any rate, the sight inflamed her and she rushed upon the two, with the fury of a cat-o'-mountain.

"Stand your ground," whispered Oxx to his friend.

"But—but—I ain't dressed as I order be in the presence of ladies," faltered the terrified Jake.

"You appear well enough now. If you turn about to run you will cut anything but a pleasing picture."

"Yes, I'll keep you between me and her, and then it'll be all right."

He was on the point of making a dash for it, when Orson Oxx commanded him to stay where he was.

"Get behind me and I won't let her harm you."

With no little trepidation, Jake stationed himself about ten feet to the rear of the Man of Iron and watched everything with an intensity of interest that would be hard to describe.

Hannah Hahlo, with the cunning of one in her sad condition, instantly perceived that she was confronted by a new and formidable foe.

But she showed not the slightest fear of him.

Weak and delicate, as compared with an ordinary man, she possessed great advantage in the inimitable swiftness and dexterity of her movements.

The unique but frightful weapon with which she was armed consisted of a wire some twenty inches in length.

Four-fifths of this was wound around her hand as if it were a string or cord.

The rest projected like a stiletto straight from her closed fingers.

She had carefully tempered it until it pos-

sessed a rigidity, which together with the fact that the point was almost like a cambric needle, was sufficient for her to bury it to its full depth into almost anything she might choose to strike.

She stopped a few feet in front of the large farmer-looking fellow, and, fixing her burning eyes on him and raising the weapon above her head, said:

"I am Queen of the Cannibal Islands; fall down and worship me."

"I shall not," replied Orson Oxx, looking her steadily in the countenance; "for I am King of the Cannibal Islands."

"Then you have come here to dethrone me?"

"I have; your reign is ended; you must do homage to me."

"Never! I am queen and you shall die!"

She made such a sudden, cat-like spring that the alarmed Jake Calkins shouted, believing his friend was doomed, beyond all possibility of escape.

But, as the delicate arm of the lady descended, or started to descend, Orson Oxx shot out his left hand and caught her by the wrist of the one which grasped the weapon.

The grip was as immovable as if it were a vise of iron.

With a cry of anger, the poor woman attempted to change the weapon to the other hand, but this required some minutes, as it necessitated the unwinding of the more flexible portion of the wire from around her fingers.

The farmer had dropped his cane and caught the left hand of the lady in his right, so that she was held inextricably fast.

Then he brought her palms together and with his single grasp spanned both wrists.

Thus he held her firmly, with one hand only, leaving the other free to use as he saw fit.

"By Jewhilkens! that was well done—"

"Shut-up! don't speak a word!"

Orson Oxx all this time kept his eyes fixed upon those of the baffled woman.

He concentrated his vision directly on her, as if he were Van Amburg of the olden time, subduing wild beasts by the power of his eye alone.

In a sepulchral voice he said:

"I am King of the Cannibal Islands! you must go with me or I will kill you!"

The lady trembled a minute, as if trying to brave it out and then succumbed.

"You are my king; I am no longer queen; I will go with you."

He unloosed her hands and still looking sharply at her, said:

"Give me your scepter."

She carefully unwound the wire from her hand and extended it to him without a word.

He shoved the briery thing into his pocket and commanded:

"Now, take my arm and accompany me to the palace."

She meekly shoved her hand beneath his elbow and awaited his pleasure.

When Jake Calkins saw them moving off, he called out:

"Mr. Oxx, I know you'll excuse me; I ain't in the suit I'd like to wear when I go to the palace; I'll wait here for you."

And leaving him where he was standing, Orson Oxx walked back to the asylum with Hannah Hahlo supported upon his arm.

A few minutes later, she was passed over to the pleased superintendent, who tendered a reward of fifty dollars to the sagacious farmer that brought in the lady.

And the sagacious farmer did not refuse the reward.

CHAPTER XLVI.

MAKING READY FOR THE COLLISION.

WHEN Orson Oxx returned from handing over the unfortunate Miss Hahlo to the superintendent of the asylum, he was surprised to find that Jake Calkins had been joined by another party.

The detective was pleased to recognize in this new arrival his young friend, the engineer and affianced of Ethel Langdon.

Russell was expecting and longing for the clear head and strong arm of the Man of Iron.

From what Jake Calkins had told him, he recognized the old farmer as the one he was looking for.

The two shook hands very cordially, and a few words explained everything.

Brayton Russell, as we have already stated, did not reach the asylum until after the flight of his beloved.

He had spent the hours since then in hunting for her, but with a discouraging want of success.

Now he was told that she was within a third of a mile of the spot where they stood, and had been there since very early that morning.

He insisted that they should go thither at once.

"I wish you would," remarked Jake Calkins, "for if you don't I've got to sneak around in the woods until dark."

"My dear boy," said Oxx, laying his hand on the arm of the impetuous lover, and speaking in his most impressive manner, "promise to follow my advice in this matter."

Brayton looked sharply at him, and hesitated.

"You must, or I shall withdraw."

"I hate to do so, but I'll give you my pledge."

"You and I have seen enough to know that the superintendent of the asylum is using every effort to recover Miss Langdon."

"Most certainly."

"This shows that he is anxious to secure her."

"Of course, for The Demon pays him well for it."

"As the case stands, the law is against us."

"How so?"

"Miss Langdon has been regularly committed to the asylum for the insane, from which she can only be brought legally by a writ of *habeas corpus*."

"But it will take us an indefinite time to procure that."

"And a longer period would be occupied in the hearing of testimony before the referee."

"And you wish to take her back to the asylum, and await the tedious legal process, which after all may fail! Never!"

"Not at all, but I want to impress upon your hot brain a cold fact or two. In the first place, if you walk down to the house of John Burrage and find Miss Langdon there, as you undoubtedly will, you will be resolved never to yield her up to any one to be taken back to the institution from which she has fled."

"You may safely stake your life on that."

"And you can stake your life on the fact that you will make a disastrous failure; not only that, but you will involve yourself in most serious trouble."

"Explain."

"You will place yourself beside your lady-love in the style of the knights of the olden time, and drawing your pistol, proclaim yourself her champion, ready to defend her to the last."

"I will."

"You will be one man against six or eight, or a dozen; they will also have pistols, and they will be likely to do some shooting in which you will serve as target."

"I would be a coward to shrink from taking that risk for the sake of such a royal lady as Ethel."

"So you would, were it necessary; but, suppose you were not harmed; there you will be in the little farm house, and how are you going to get away? It is quite a long walk to the railroad station, and if you should attempt it, you would be encircled by the officers of the law before you could reach the main highway."

The chivalrous Brayton was silent for a minute.

He saw that as he had promised, the detective had given some facts that were exceedingly cold to one of his ardent temperament.

"It is all very fine," added Oxx, "to fancy what daring deeds we are going to perform in defense of some fair one who is in no danger, but that man is wise who looks to the probable issue which is always the opposite of what his fancy pictures."

"Then you propose that we should allow them to take Ethel back to the asylum?"

"I have told you that I did not."

"What is your proposition?"

"When you left me in Ardville last night, the understanding was that you were to depend upon legal means to secure her liberty, but since that means is not so ready as you hoped I am willing to do my utmost to help free her, depending upon the chance of making it right with the outraged majesty of the law afterward."

"But tell me how."

"This cannot be done by main force, but we must use strategy."

"In what way?"

"We must have a carriage and a span of fast horses at command; we must place the lady within the vehicle and hurry her out of the county or State if necessary."

"What do we gain by that?"

"During the time necessary to secure her requisition, we shall be able to establish her soundness of mind."

Brayton Russell's eyes sparkled at the prospect the sharp adventure promised.

"I incline to your suggestion, Oxx."

"It is a good one; we will have the carriage ready, with two good horses and a driver; we will place Ethel inside, with you and me, and then go like mad for some point they won't suspect. Before they can follow and trace us, we will have Ethel out of the State altogether."

"I'd like to be the driver of that establishment," said Jake Calkins; "it would suit me."

"Are you familiar with this country?" asked Russell.

"Thoroughly so; I have spent a good many months in roaming over the neighborhood for miles around and can find my way anywhere within twenty miles, on the darkest night you ever saw."

Unfortunately Orson Oxx and Brayton Russell believed this assertion of the colossal falsifier.

"It will be hard work to find such a carriage as we want," said Russell, "but I will try it."

"Bring it to the edge of the wood, within sight of the gate which opens into the lane of John Burrage; but don't come until the sun goes down, for we must make this flight in the darkness."

"While Mr. Russell is off hunting for the carriage," said Jake, "Mr. Oxx can slip down to the house and get those trousers for me."

"It shall be done," replied the kind hearted Man of Iron, who set out at once for the farmhouse, while Brayton Russell began his hunt for a closed carriage and a swift span of horses.

CHAPTER XLVII.

DR. BELL BECOMES DISCOURAGED.

THE hours passed drearily to Ethel Langdon, who sat in the little drawing-room of the house in which she had found shelter.

She wondered why Hannah or Calkins did not return, and could not rid herself of a dread that something terrible had happened.

Noon came and passed, and nothing startling occurred.

But shortly after that hour events began with a rush and kept on a jump to the end.

She had finished a scanty dinner, when the dog outside uttered a growl, and there came a faint knock on the door, which was unlocked.

Without waiting for an answer, the one who knocked shoved the door inward and stepped inside.

Ethel attempted to reach the drawing room, but she had not time.

She turned about and stood face to face with Dr. Adonijah Bell, one of her abductors!

The cunning visitor had kept the building under surveillance, until he saw Mr. Burrage come forth and disappear down the road.

He knew that Calkins had not returned after his fright received from Miss Hahlo.

Consequently there were no men in the house, and it would be a safe time to arrest the young lady.

He approached the building by a circuitous route, hoping to escape being seen by those within, then slipped round to the front, where he entered with so little preliminary warning that he came directly upon Ethel.

The doctor smiled with exultation.

"Good-afternoon, Miss Langdon," he said, in his most impressive style, as he helped himself to a chair; "I hope I find you well, although I can hardly expect you are glad to see me."

Ethel, with rare self-command, bowed and seated herself. There was a slight flush on her face as she answered:

"I must admit that it is no pleasure to find myself in the presence of a ruffianly villain at any time."

"Tut, tut," whispered Mrs. Burrage, alarmed to hear such scorching personalities; "be careful, please."

"You are disposed to be rather severe, but much must be forgiven in one who is non-compromised."

"Could such a plea be made in your behalf, it would be a credit to humanity."

"Will you be kind enough to put on your

bat and shawl and accompany me to Dr. Juliard's?"

"I decline to go."

"The distance is not great, and you can easily walk: I hope I shall not be compelled to put handcuffs on you and use force."

Ethel shuddered, for she saw no help for herself.

Her lover had not come, and she must go back to prison.

"I will go with you," she said, rising to her feet.

Mrs. Burrage helped her to put on her hat and shawl, the doctor respectfully waiting, bat in hand.

Bidding good-by to her kind friend in a low voice, Ethel followed the detested Doctor Bell out of the door.

Side by side they passed down the short lane, neither uttering a word.

They walked slowly, looking down at the ground in front of them, with very different themes occupying their thoughts.

Doctor Bell was congratulating himself on the ease with which he was about to earn fifty dollars.

"It looks as if this young lady was going to be a regular gold mine to me," he muttered with a chuckle.

Ethel was sad and sorrowful.

"What a cruel disappointment," she murmured; "I abominate that prison and it may be that I shall be kept there for years and years; if I am I shall die."

"Oh, why does not Brayton come—"

Just then she looked up and saw Brayton before her.

He had not gone far on his quest for the carriage and team, when he lingered, to take a survey of the building which was sanctified in his eyes by the knowledge that it held the most precious being in all the world to him.

While gazing upon it with the rapt ardor of one who was infatuated with his beloved, he saw her come forth, accompanied by a man who was a stranger.

The sight instantly upset all his calculations.

He turned about and started back, timing his progress, so that he met the couple as they came out into the main highway.

When Ethel recognized him, she uttered a faint scream and stopped.

Brayton Russell restrained his eagerness to rush forward and enfold her in his arms and demanded:

"Ethel, who is *he*?"

"He is one of the men who placed me in the carriage the other night and brought me to the asylum."

The words were hardly uttered, when the young engineer made a plunge for the miscreant.

He was boiling over with anger and meant to punish him as he deserved for the outrage.

Doctor Bell thought it was a good time for disappearing.

He therefore proceeded to disappear.

He had had considerable practice of late in fleeing and he got over the ground with such haste that his irate enemy desisted from pursuit before going far.

The disgusted doctor circled about so that in escaping the vengeance of the young man he came face to face with Orson Oxx.

"I'm glad to meet you!" exclaimed the panting physician; "do you see that young man over yonder with his arm around that young lady's waist?"

The old farmer, after turning his spectacles in several directions, finally located the loving couple.

"That woman is crazy as a loon."

"You don't say so!"

"Yes; I was taking her out for a walk, when he came up and threatened to kill me if I didn't give her up to him."

"How do you know she is crazy?"

"Because I'm a physician and examined her."

"Wal, what of it?"

"I'll give you five dollars if you'll go and pound that man so I can get the lunatic to prison."

"Can't do it for less than ten dollars."

"Well, here's your money! Be quick about it or they'll get away."

The old farmer deliberately folded up the two five-dollar bills which were placed in his pocket and then asked:

"Are you one of the doctors that examined Miss Langdon the other night and carried her off to the asylum?"

"Certainly, I just told you I was."

"Do you want to know my opinion of you?"

"What do you—"

"Here it is!"

Catching the astounded doctor by the collar of his coat, Orson Oxx twisted him about and delivered three tremendous kicks in quick succession.

Their force was appalling, for each time the horrified scamp was lifted clear from the ground and he didn't fully recover from the castigation for several weeks afterward.

Getting beyond reach of the awful foot, Doctor Bell broke into another run, wondering whether, from the way things were going, he was to be kept on the run all his lifetime.

He was discouraged.

Orson Oxx then proceeded to the house of John Burrage, stated the lamentable case of Jake Calkins, secured a substantial pair of trousers, which belonged to the brother-in-law and made the Jerseyman happy by delivering them to him a few minutes later.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

NOT A MINUTE TO LOSE!

"BRAYTON!"

"Ethel, my own beloved!"

And the overjoyed maiden rushed into the arms of her lover, who pressed her to his heart again and again, showering kisses upon her cheeks and lips.

"I thought you would *never* come," she murmured, hiding her queenly head on his shoulder.

"I have been searching for you ever since they took you away; you shall *never* leave me again."

"No, no, no; nothing but death shall part us!"

And again he embraced the dear, sweet one.

And then, standing there in the glare of the Autumn sun, they talked over the teeming past and the blissful present.

The delighted Brayton Russell forgot his promise to follow the counsel of the Man of Iron.

He forgot that he had set out to procure a conveyance, in which to hasten away with the idol of his soul.

He forgot that every minute they stood thus, they increased the very peril from which she was fleeing.

He forgot everything except that he held her in his arms, and the world had suddenly changed from a dismal, dreary waste, to a region of radiant sunshine and happiness.

The lovers would have stood thus much longer had not Orson Oxx, having delivered the garments for which Jake Calkins craved, hastened to the spot.

He announced his coming by a vigorous clearing of the throat.

Releasing the lady, Brayton Russell introduced the detective to her.

The pleased Man of Iron shook both by the hand and warmly congratulated them.

"But you must not stay here," he added; "every minute, as you well know, Brayton, is fraught with danger."

"What shall be done?"

"Complete the errand on which you started."

"To procure a carriage?"

"Yes."

"Where shall I find one?"

"Certainly not *here*."

"What shall be done with Ethel while I am away?"

"I shall be pleased to take her under my protection."

"You could not be in safer hands; go to him, my dearest."

"The friend of Brayton is my friend," said the lady with a charming smile, as she stepped to the young man and placed her delicate gloved hand in his.

Orson Oxx felt a slight flutter of the heart, for she was a wondrously enchanting woman.

But the feeling vanished on the instant.

He was the soul of honor, and he would have given up his life, sooner than harbor a wrong thought toward his friend.

He had never been disloyal to a true man, and he never could be.

"But, when I obtain the team (if I do)," said Brayton, "where shall I bring it?"

The detective was thoughtful a minute.

"I observed that the road which leads by the woods over yonder makes a sharp angle to the right; drive down to this place, where the one from the asylum debouches into the main highway."

"Suppose a force is on watch here?"

"If the outlook is unfavorable and we do not appear, drive up the road and turn to the right; I will conduct the young lady through the wood, and you can pick us up beyond. The distance we will thus travel will be much shorter than yours, and it will occasion little delay, even though you drive fast."

"Very well; that's the understanding then."

And Brayton called out good-by and hastened away.

Left in charge of the young lady, Orson Oxx gave his whole attention and energy to her safety.

"It will be more prudent to enter the forest," said he, offering his arm and moving in that direction.

"Your wishes are my law."

"There is such a hue and cry over your flight, that we shall be forced to use extreme care."

"I wonder what has become of the lady who came away with me?"

"I met her and conducted her back to the asylum a short time ago," replied the Man of Iron, who did not think it necessary to explain the particulars, nor to tell of his vigorous chastisement of the unprincipled Doctor Bell.

They speedily entered the wood where they were joined by the waiting Jake Calkins.

The latter had little to say, for he was convinced that the company was not a promising one in which to indulge in his ludicrous vaporings.

As the detective had intimated, they found their situation one of extreme danger.

They moved from place to place in the wood, with great caution, for the attendants were searching everywhere for them.

At the suggestion of Oxx, Jake Calkins crept up close to the appointed rendezvous, and watched for the coming of the carriage.

It was agreed that when it appeared, he was to make it known by a whistled signal.

Both Oxx and the lady felt that the chances were against the success of Brayton Russell's scheme.

It might not be difficult to find such a conveyance as they wished, but it would be hard to meet an owner willing to place it in charge of a stranger.

Russell had agreed to return at nightfall, whether he succeeded or not.

In case of failure, the party would endeavor to steal out of the neighborhood in the darkness of night.

For a time the young engineer met with refusal at every place to which he made application.

Good fortune at last attended him.

He found an old acquaintance to whom he stated his difficulty and his wishes.

Precisely the carriage and the team needed were promptly placed at his disposal.

Just as it was growing dusk, Jake Calkins gave the preconcerted signal, and Orson Oxx and Ethel Langdon moved carefully forward.

When they reached the main highway the carriage was in waiting.

But fully a dozen men were also there, as though they had received knowledge of the intended attempt.

Orson Oxx surveyed the outlook, and determined to make the essay.

"*Quick!*" he whispered, taking the arm of the lady, and half carrying her on a rapid run toward the carriage.

She hurried in, Brayton followed, and Jake Calkins springing on the seat, caught up the reins, and lashed the horses into a dead run.

At the same instant several men dashed forward from the roadside to intercept them.

Orson Oxx, as might have been expected, waited until his three friends had preceded him, when he attempted to leap upon the seat of the moving vehicle.

He would have succeeded, had not one of the attendants seized his arm at the very instant, checking him just enough to permit the horses to dash away and leave him behind.

"*We've got you, old fellow,*" exclaimed his indignant captor, "*and we'll make you sweat for this!*"

CHAPTER XLIX.

WHEN THE SUN WENT DOWN.

It was a moment of fearful excitement, when the daring attempt was made to carry Ethel Langdon away in the face of the dozen furious men, who rushed forward to prevent it.

It was one of those occasions, when the

slightest mistake or hitch in the programme is sure to be fatal.

Everything it may be said, depended on Orson Oxx and he managed it well.

Brayton Russell suspected the meaning of the whistle of Jake Calkins and he was ready.

The Jerseyman was the first one to rush forward from the wood.

The instant Russell saw him coming, he leaped down from his seat and Jake Calkins, with commendable dexterity, clambered into his place and caught up the lines.

Just as the young engineer landed upon the ground, and drew open the door of the closed carriage, Orson Oxx was there with Ethel.

At the same moment, the dark figures began rushing forward from the sides of the road.

Ethel sprang nimbly in, Brayton was after her in a twinkling and Jake Calkins who was dreadfully flurried, struck the horse a sharp blow with the whip.

They bounded forward with a tremendous leap, the door of the vehicle flying back and forth, as it plunged away, leaving Orson Oxx standing on the ground, at the very instant he was about to make a prodigious leap for the seat.

Brayton Russell had drawn his pistol, determined to fire upon any one who should try to stop them. He supposed in the terrible excitement that the detective had seated himself on the top of the carriage.

Jake Calkins didn't suppose anything except that he ought to get out of such a neighborhood with the least possible delay.

He continued lashing the horses into a dead run, and, when he heard the report of several pistols, he leaned forward and downward, so as to let the missiles pass over his head.

"We've got you, old fellow," exclaimed the indignant captor of Orson Oxx, "and we'll make you sweat for this!"

"Keep your hands off!" warned the Man of Iron, leaping back, so as to clear himself of those crowding upon him; "the man that touches me will get hurt."

A general rush followed and then the rash people began going down like ten-pins.

Orson Oxx did not intend to be taken prisoner just then.

When he had created a large sized panic, he turned about and dashed into the woods.

By the time his assailants had rallied somewhat, they caught a glimpse of a vanishing figure among the trees.

Several essayed to follow him, but the attempt was a weak one, and was abandoned almost as soon as begun.

If they could not get the best of such a terrific man in the highway, when the sun was going down, the chances were not bright in the wood, with the gloomy night closing in.

Orson Oxx was one of those phenomenal detectives who thought with lightning-like quickness in the most desperate crisis.

At the moment of turning and plunging into the woods, he reflected that by making the "cut across to's," of which he had spoken to Brayton Russell, he was likely to intercept the team in its furious flight.

He would have to "grab ground," with the utmost alacrity, to succeed in doing so.

But he was the individual who was able to do that thing.

There could be no doubt that the turn in the road would be made, for it was a single highway the entire distance, and the start being in that direction, there was no way of escaping the angle.

Accordingly the Man of Iron strained every nerve to beat the galloping team.

While they were describing the base and altitude of a right-angled triangle, he was booming along the hypotenuse.

Fortunately the distance was brief.

Furthermore, he had a distinctly marked path through the patch of forest with which he had made himself very familiar during the afternoon, when moving about with Miss Langdon, to escape the prying eyes of those who were hunting for her.

A few minutes only were needed to take him, through the wood, when he bounded over the fence and paused in the highway.

Looking down the road, which led along the forest, he fancied that through the gloom of the gathering night, he caught the figures of horses and a carriage approaching in a cloud of dust.

At the same time, he heard the vigorous shouts of the driver, who seemed to be considerably panic-stricken.

There could be no doubt they were his friends.

Stepping into the middle of the road, Orson Oxx raised his hand as a command for Calkins to halt.

But the driver, in his extreme fright did not recognize him and took him to be an enemy.

He had slackened the gait of his team somewhat, as it was necessary, in order to pass the bend in the road safely, but he now began lashing them again.

Suspecting the truth, the detective shouted, but in vain.

Calkins showed a determination to ride down the highwayman, if he maintained his position, and Oxx was forced to leap aside to escape being trampled to death by the fiercely driven horses.

He shouted again at the top of his voice to Russell, as the vehicle bounded by him.

Fortunately the young man recognized the figure as it whirled back in the gloom and caught the familiar tones of the voice.

Thrusting his head through the carriage door, he called to Jake in such stentorian tones, that he was heard and understood.

Instantly the Jerseyman began pulling on the lines, and speedily brought the animals to a halt.

All three looked backward and identified the manly fellow who came trotting toward them.

A minute later he seated himself in the carriage and laughed over the mishap which had turned out so well after all.

CHAPTER I.

JOURNEYING WHITHER!

"In the first place," said the Man of Iron, "there is no need of driving so fast."

"Don't you think we will be followed?"

"We are very likely to be pursued, but it will take some time for the pursuers to get ready."

"There seemed to be a large number of them lurking around the spot where you and Ethel were waiting for me."

"There were fully a dozen, but every one was on foot."

"It will not take them long to find the means to press us hard."

"Long enough to make this frantic haste unnecessary. Besides, we have a long drive before us, and we must husband the strength of our horses."

Accordingly Jake Calkins was directed to bring the animals down to a moderate trot and to hold them there, unless he should discover pursuers behind him.

"Well," said Brayton Russell, who, as may be supposed, was in high glee, "it looks as though we have outwitted them at last."

"We are not out of the woods yet."

"What is your course of action?"

Orson Oxx now turned about on the front seat and called to Jake Calkins to stop.

"You say you are familiar with this country, Jake?"

"Yes, sir, perfectly," was the unblushing response.

"How far is it to Burrsville?"

"Eleven miles and three quarters."

(We are sorry to say that Jacob Calkins, on this occasion, heard the name of that little town for the first time in his life.)

"You know the way?"

"Perfectly."

"Drive there, then, at a moderate pace."

"Ay, ay; you may consider it done."

"Why do you wish to go to Burrsville?" asked Brayton Russell, as the detective resumed his seat facing him, and the carriage rolled on again.

"That is a station on the railroad where I think we can intercept the night line to New York."

"Will they not be likely to telegraph ahead to the authorities to stop us?"

"We cannot escape that risk no matter what direction we take; it will be no greater or less there than anywhere else."

"Why not keep to the carriage for several days and nights, or long enough to pass out of the State?"

"I do not see how that will lessen the risk, for we must pass through many towns and villages, every one of which is within reach of the telegraph."

"Will they not be likely to devote all their energies to pursuing us and leave the telegraph alone for some hours?"

This question was asked by Ethel Langdon and Orson Oxx was quick to compliment her on her sagacity.

"That is my view precisely; I hope to get beyond their reach before they recover from their flurry and excitement."

"Suppose we should cross into Vermont or Pennsylvania, or New Jersey, what then?" asked the lady again.

"The legal steps necessary to take you back into the State of New York will require much delay, and that delay I regard as certain to give you the opportunity to prove the outrageous nature of this entire proceeding on the part of your uncle."

"And what will uncle do?"

"That must be all conjecture," replied Orson Oxx, who might have added that in his opinion it was more than likely that the Winking Demon would find his attention engaged very soon by other important matters.

"Suppose it is shown that his act toward me was without the first justification in fact?"

"That would be a hard matter to show; his proceedings were legal, inasmuch as they were based on the certificate of two physicians, who, I doubt not, are in good standing in the profession."

"But can't we do something with them?" asked Ethel, full of indignation over the memory of her wrongs.

"Leave them alone," was the philosophical remark of the Man of Iron; "it never pays to occupy your energies with schemes of revenge, and time at last is sure to make all things even."

"Which sounds very well," said Brayton, with a laugh, "but is hardly in accord with your profession."

"I am never actuated by a motive of revenge."

"But you don't show any alarming disposition to leave criminals alone for time to even up on."

"It is always easier to preach than practice," admitted Orson, with a laugh.

At the same time he could have explained more fully what he meant had he chosen to do so.

"If you will pardon me," he added a moment later, "I will venture the suggestion that the wish of Mr. Langdon that his niece should not wed before reaching her legal majority is entitled to less consideration at this hour than it was several days ago."

Ethel hastened to say:

"I might have granted his wish had he made it known and had he treated me as he should have done."

"What?" exclaimed Brayton, turning reproachfully toward her.

"I think I said I might have acquiesced; I am not sure what I would have done had the test been made."

"I know very well what I would have done," murmured the happy lover, pressing the dear form close to his side.

Being a sensible person, Orson Oxx could not fail to feel that he was altogether a superfluous member of the little company in the carriage, and yet he was at a loss for a pretext to go outside.

Unless he could offer a good one, he knew that both his friends would object.

Fortunately the excuse was not long in coming.

They were chatting in their familiar, pleasant manner, when the driver suddenly increased his pace.

"What's up?" called Oxx through the front to his friend.

"They're chasing us!"

"How many?"

"I make thirteen," was the astonishing response, "but there may be a few more."

"My gracious!" exclaimed Oxx; "I must take a look at that."

With little difficulty he climbed to the top and seated himself beside Jake Calkins.

"Where are they?"

"You don't suppose they would be in front?" asked the driver with a laugh.

"There is as much probability of finding them there as there is of the thirteen being anywhere."

"Use your eyes and tell me how you make out."

The Man of Iron had already taken a sweeping glance down the road in search of his enemies.

Such scrutiny satisfied him beyond question that there were pursuers behind him.

But he could only distinguish two.

Unfortunately these were mounted on horseback.

Such being the case it would be impossible for the carriage to distance them, provided their animals were any sort of travelers at all.

What was to be feared from such pursuers, inasmuch as the two were too weak to make a demonstration against the fugitives?

They could follow the vehicle until it halted at some town or station, as it must soon do, and they could secure the arrest of the entire party.

Their presence therefore, so near at hand, was a cause of uneasiness to Orson Oxx.

"We must throw them off the scent in some way," he said, after discussing the matter with Jake Calkins.

"That won't be an easy job, unless we should capture them."

"Capture them!" repeated the astonished detective, "what are you talking about?"

"Why couldn't we coax 'em up close and then down 'em? Then we could make 'em promise to turn round and go back as fast as their animals could travel?"

Orson Oxx looked at his companion on the seat.

The stars were now shining and the homely countenance was plainly visible.

From the expression brooding there, no doubt could remain that he was in sober earnest.

His confidence in the prowess of the great detective was unlimited.

CHAPTER LI.

UNPLEASANT NEIGHBORS.

ORSON OXX foresaw unpleasant, if not serious consequences, from the proximity of the pursuers.

But how to shake them off was the question. The utmost speed of the team would not surpass the gallop of the animals behind them.

After some minutes' careful observation, Orson Oxx became satisfied that only two were following them.

Why didn't they hasten forward and attempt to stop the fugitives?

The detective was sure he knew the reason why they failed to do so, and it was anything but reassuring.

They were simply dogging the carriage, and intended to keep it in view, until they could ride forward and summon assistance.

By direction of Oxx, Jake Calkins drew the team down to a slow walk, so as to give their pursuers an opportunity to ride up beside them.

The horsemen, as soon as they observed the decrease in pace, checked their steeds, and maintained about the same relative distance in the rear.

Then Jake struck into the swiftest trot of which the excellent team was capable.

This was continued a half-mile.

When he and Calkins glanced back, they saw the phantom horsemen only a short distance behind them.

Orson Oxx became more annoyed than he was willing to admit.

Calling down the carriage, he asked Brayton Russell to return him his pistol.

At the same time he told Ethel not to be alarmed over what he was about to do.

"Now, Jake, stop the horses."

Calkins obeyed.

The horsemen did the same.

"That's enough; drive on."

As the animals resumed their brisk gait, Orson Oxx pointed his weapon backward, and discharged two of the chambers.

The distance was too great to do any harm, and he deflected the muzzle so as to avert the possibility.

He had a faint hope, from what seemed a lack of courage on the part of the pursuers, that such a demonstration might induce them to withdraw.

On the contrary, they instantly returned the fire.

"By Jewhilkens!" exclaimed the frightened driver, "that's coming a little too close for comfort."

"How is that?"

"Didn't you hear that bullet?"

"I should say not."

"I did; it passed right between us; it grazed my face, and I feel the sting on my cheek."

Orson Oxx laughed.

"Under all circumstances and on all occa-

sions, Jake, you display a resolution to maintain the reputation you won long ago."

"Honest Injin, there's no fooling about that; the bullet that 'ere feller fired grazed my cheek."

"If it had struck it fairly I don't think it would have harmed you."

Jake thought this remark was too personal, and held his peace for a time.

But he, too, was troubled over the doggedness with which the horsemen kept up the pursuit without "uncovering," as may be said.

He had seen so much of the performances of the Man of Iron, that he felt unlimited confidence in them.

He proposed to Oxx that he should dismount, go back, and "lambast" the presumptuous rascals until they would be glad to stop annoying them.

"I have done a great deal more of that business, Jake, than is pleasant to me."

"I guess it was a darned sight more pleasant to you than to the other fellers," was the truthful comment of Jake.

"Possibly it was, but I dislike it, nevertheless. Let me ask, are you familiar with this road?"

"Perfectly."

"Are there many cross-roads?"

"About the average."

"And stretches of woods?"

"Now and then we may expect 'em."

The answers of Jake Calkins were none the less prompt because they were entirely blind.

"I don't know as it is possible to throw them off, but I think I see a faint chance, provided the woods and cross-roads are abundant, and you know every turn."

"Let your mind rest easy on that," was the unblushing reply of Jake Calkins.

"How far is it to Burrsville?"

The monumental falsifier glanced right and left, as if in search of landmarks.

Then he quickly answered:

"Eight miles and three tenths."

Orson Oxx looked suspiciously at him.

"Jake, this is no time for fooling, remember."

"That's my opinion, 'zactly."

"And we must know the truth, and nothing else."

"Which is the reason why I'm telling you the square, honest truth, right straight all along."

And Jake Calkins looked as though his feelings had been hurt by the insinuation contained in the observations of his invincible friend sitting by his side.

CHAPTER LII.

HIDING IN THE DARKNESS.

ABOUT this time, the two horsemen displayed a disposition to dally with the parties in front, something after the manner of a cat with a mouse which she is sure must fall into her hands in due time.

They fell back until they were invisible, and then in a few minutes dashed forward into view again.

They hovered on the line of invisibility, sometimes beyond and sometimes in plain sight.

Shortly after, the watchful eyes of Orson Oxx observed a carriage in front.

In the darkness, he could not make out its character, but it was advancing about as fast as themselves.

The discovery seemed to give the Man of Iron a new project altogether.

"Jake, let me take the lines a short while," said he.

"Do you know how to drive?" asked the other, passing the reins to him.

"I have you at my side to prompt me."

Orson Oxx now strove to hold himself about half-way between the horsemen and the vehicle in front.

Both were dimly in sight most of the time, but the pursuers, apparently in mere wantonness, frequently dropped back out of view.

Suddenly the carriage was observed to make an abrupt turn to the left.

Orson Oxx glanced behind him, and, seeing nothing of the horsemen instantly struck his own team into their swiftest pace.

It was not a trot but a full gallop, and he called upon Jake Calkins to lash them to their utmost.

Not understanding precisely what it meant, the countryman obeyed and the carriage bounded forward at a terrific pace.

With a thrill of pleasure, the new driver

discovered that two roads crossed at the point where the strange carriage turned to the left.

It was the very thing he hoped for, but he hoped also with fear and trembling.

He made a right-angle in the opposite direction and kept the team at their best pace.

Jake Calkins now perceived what the plan of his friend was and he admired him more than ever, though he could scarcely believe he would succeed.

"Take the lines, Jake," said he, "and don't let up one jot until I give you the word."

Calkins did as requested, while Oxx glanced back every second in quest of that which he dreaded to see.

When he supposed the horses of their pursuers were close to the cross-roads, the detective touched the arm of the driver and told him to halt.

Jake Calkins quickly brought the animals to a standstill.

Then they carefully listened.

And this they were satisfied was precisely what the horsemen were doing about the same time.

Having lost sight of the carriage in front, they would stop and listen for the sounds which would tell the direction it had taken.

As the vehicle itself was standing still, Orson Oxx was hopeful that they would mistake the faint noise made by the other and follow that over the wrong road.

Minutes passed, during which Brayton Russell thrust his head out the door and was told what it all signified, and then each listened for the noise of horses' hoofs.

But the straining ears failed to catch the alarming sound and with hopeful hearts, the fugitives resumed their flight.

"Won't they be likely to find out the trick I played onto 'em?" asked Jake Calkins, when they had driven some distance.

"I wasn't aware that you had played them any trick."

"I mean us—it's all in the family."

"It is liable to happen, but I think not likely; they seem to have adopted the custom of keeping so far back, that they can gain only a dim view of us. Such being the case, they are not apt to notice the difference between the carriages."

There could be no certainty on this point, however, and the two drivers, as they may be termed, were continually listening for the unwelcome sounds.

A half-mile further on, they crossed another road and shortly after encountered a couple of men in an open wagon.

"I'm sorry for that," remarked Orson Oxx, "for if our pursuers meet them, they will gain the knowledge we don't want them to have."

They now had reached a stretch of forest, which bordered the highway on both sides.

"We must throw them off the track, if possible," said Orson Oxx, "and we may have succeeded, but it is too soon to rejoice."

In the darkest part of the wood, the horses were stopped and all listened.

Brayton Russell opened the door of the carriage and he and his sweetheart sat silent and attentive.

"I hear horses' hoofs," she suddenly exclaimed in a low voice, audible however to all.

"So do I," promptly chimed in Jake Calkins, so promptly that every one knew he was falsifying.

It was like Jennie Brown at Lucknow; no one else caught the sound for a minute or two.

Then the noise of horses' hoofs came distinctly through the stillness of the night.

The two men whom they were so anxious to avoid were upon their heels again.

Orson Oxx leaped from his seat and examined the woods upon each side.

"The road is pretty broad," said he; "pull the team out to one side, as far as you can, Jake, and we will see whether we can't hide while they go by."

Calkins followed instructions with no little skill.

The spirited team showed some objection to the unusual proceeding, but they were forced from the main highway, until the wheels crowded the fence on the right, and their traces grazed the rails.

An examination then showed that a party standing in the middle of the road would not notice the team on the right.

There was no moon and the darkness under the trees was impenetrable.

All our friends left the carriage and stood near at hand, Jake Calkins placing himself at

the head of the horses, so as to be ready to seize their heads the instant it should become necessary.

His horsemanship taught him that the great thing to be feared was that the animals would betray their presence by whinnying or neighing to those passing.

"We are acting as though we are fleeing murderers," said Ethel Langdon, who did not admire the trepidation shown by her friends.

"And you are treated as if you were one," observed her lover, who felt indignant whenever he recalled the outrageous cruelty shown her.

"Suppose they discover us, Oxx?" asked Russell.

"I dislike to use violence," said the Man of Iron, "but I do not see how in that event it can be avoided."

"What is your plan?"

"If they give trouble, why I can compel them to dismount," said Oxx with a peculiar intonation, "and then turn their horses loose, so they will be unable to use them: then we shall leave them out of sight with little trouble."

"SH!"

Looking down the road, they saw the outlines of the horsemen, who immediately after entered the shadow thrown out by the wood and became invisible.

A minute later they came opposite the fugitives.

The latter stood motionless in the attitude of intense attention.

The steeds were on a sweeping gallop, for their riders were evidently impressed with the necessity of haste.

But their beasts were more sagacious than they in the gloom of the night, and were quick to discover the proximity of others of their own species.

As they came opposite, one of the animals shied a little and uttered a neigh of salutation to his brothers beside the road.

CHAPTER LIII.

JAKE CALKINS CLAIMS A MISUNDERSTANDING.

THE instant the cantering horse in the road shied and uttered his neigh, one of the team of our friends, shrouded as they were in darkness, threw up his head to reply.

But Jake Calkins had been looking for this and was prepared.

Grasping the nose of the animal, he forced it down on his chest with such violence that the brute forgot his wish to whinny and lost all interest in the other animals.

Calkins was prepared to adopt the same remedy with the other steed, should it become necessary.

But the latter was wise in time and held his peace.

"What the blazes is that?" asked the horseman who was jolted almost out of his saddle by the unexpected shying of his beast.

"A ghost I suppose," replied the other with a laugh.

"I've a good notion to find out," observed the first, drawing his horse down to a walk.

"Hang it, what difference does it make? We'll never catch sight of those folks again, if we are to go mousing into the woods for what scared our horses. Come on!"

By this time, the impatient pursuer was some distance in advance of his companion of an investigating turn, who concluded to forego his purpose, and immediately spurred forward again.

Our friends scarcely spoke until after the sounds of the hoofs had died out in the distance.

Then they conferred in whispers.

The plan was to turn back to the cross roads and take a new course altogether.

Could they do so, without detection, there was the best of reason for hoping that the horsemen would be so astray that they would be eliminated from the problem altogether.

The carriage was carefully turned around, the lovers re-entered, Oxx placed himself on the seat on top and Jake Calkins resumed charge of the reins.

The detective was aware of the device by which the driver had shut off the neigh which would have betrayed them, and he gave him full credit therefor.

"It was well done, Jake," said he; "and it is a good thing you are so familiar with the road."

"Of course it is."

"Can you tell me how far we are from Burrsville?"

"It is seven miles and a third from the woods we have just left."

"We ought to reach there in the course of an hour or so."

"We shall do so," was the confident response of the cheerful falsifier; "give yourself no uneasiness on that score."

"Do you know when the down train stops there?"

"At half-past nine exactly, that is if it is on time."

"I am hopeful that the principal difficulty of this business is over, though I have felt all along as though Algot Langdon ought to show his hand."

For the following half-hour, the team bowled along at a spanking gait, the eyes and ears of the two men on the outside seat being wide open.

Occasionally they paused and listened, but nothing was heard to indicate they were being followed.

Now and then they met parties on horseback or in conveyances and at rare intervals passed others.

Orson Oxx for a time had little to say, for as the night progressed he seemed to become thoughtful.

However, he soon threw off this tendency, brightened up, and if possible, became more observant than usual.

When it seemed to him they had gone a number of miles, he asked the driver:

"Are we pretty near Burrsville?"

"It ain't half a mile off."

"Straight ahead?"

"Don't you see it?"

Looking up, the detective perceived they were approaching some town, for the lights were twinkling so brightly that there could be no mistake on the point.

Orson Oxx called down to his friends in the vehicle that they were close to the railroad station, and they might make ready to leave the carriage.

"We will put up the team and Russell can telegraph instructions to the owner. Russell says he is an old friend, who was glad of the assistance he was able to render him."

A moment later, they entered the outskirts of the small town and Jake Calkins drew the horses down to a walk.

All at once it struck Orson Oxx that there was something familiar in the appearance of the houses as dimly seen in the starlight.

He looked again in a startled way, and was confirmed in his suspicion that he was in a familiar neighborhood.

He started and peered into the partially illuminated gloom.

Ay, he was not mistaken.

The large building on his left was the Delaware House, where he had met quite a stirring experience.

"Jake!" said the indignant detective, "this is Ardville."

"Ain't that where you told me to drive?"

"Why, no, you lunkhead! I said Burrsville."

"Oh, you did! I misunderstood you; I thought you directed me to make haste to Ardville; sorry I didn't catch the name."

Orson Oxx was so astounded that he was speechless for the moment.

Then, when he recovered, he could hardly restrain himself from flinging the fellow to the ground.

And the next minute, he laughed to himself.

"He did that out of pure cussedness," he said to himself; "he is an absolute stranger in this neighborhood and he lied simply because he couldn't help it— Great Heaven!"

The carriage was still in motion, when Orson Oxx made a tremendous leap from his seat to the ground and instantly vanished in the darkness with the speed of a wild deer!

CHAPTER LIV.

THE PITCHER GOES ONCE TOO OFTEN TO THE FOUNTAIN.

ORSON OXX vanished so suddenly and unaccountably, that Jake Calkins halted the team at a loss what to do.

Brayton Russell thrust his head out and asked the driver the meaning of the sudden flight of their friend.

"Jewhilkens! if I know," was the response.

"How is it you have driven to Ardville?" asked the engineer, who naturally enough recognized the place.

"It was a misunderstanding," was the astonishing reply; "I thought this was where—"

"Hello! there's some excitement; what's up?"

A crowd of people were tearing along the highway like madmen, uttering shouts and cries of the fiercest nature.

"There he goes! Catch him! He's the fire-bug! Don't let him get away this time!"

"Great heavens!" gasped Brayton Russell; "they're after Orson Oxx again."

He sprung out the carriage, telling Calkins to drive to the hotel and wait with Ethel until his return.

Fearful that he would be unable to save his friend this time, Russell ran with all the speed of which he was capable, resolved to spare no effort to protect him.

But he made a slight mistake.

Orson Oxx was in no personal danger.

It was a different individual altogether.

The Man of Iron was seated on the carriage talking with Jake Calkins and was on the point of upbraiding him for his stupidity or rather deception, when he heard the ominous cry:

"Fire!"

At the same instant, he detected the well known glare which was becoming familiar to him.

It was only a short distance to the left, and, believing there was a providence in the thing, he sprung down and dashed for the spot with all the prodigious energy of which he was master.

He had taken but two or three of his tremendous bounds when he caught a glimpse of a tall, dark figure speeding away with the swiftness of the wind.

Close behind him were three men, and behind them seemed half the male adults of the village.

It happened in this instance that three of the most watchful villagers were on guard, and they happened to be near where the twentieth incendiary attempt was made.

They saw the bright, star-like point and observed the tall, dark figure spring to his feet and make off.

Calling upon him to surrender, the Vigilantes started in hot pursuit.

But the fire-bug was fleet of foot, and he sped away like an arrow, threatening to elude them as he had done on more than one occasion before.

But at the critical moment Orson Oxx arrived on the scene.

He was just in time to catch sight of the flying figure, whose identity he knew like a flash.

When the long-limbed Winking Demon ran with might and main his limp was scarcely perceptible.

Orson Oxx saw that he was heading for the path which led to the wood, where he escaped so narrowly before.

"I think I can run you down this time, my beauty," muttered the Man of Iron, bending his utmost energies to prevent a repetition of his former trick.

Fortunately Orson Oxx had been seen when he sprung to the ground and plunged after the fugitive.

There was no confounding him with the criminal this time.

The furious pursuit had lasted but a short time, when the most energetic pursuers perceived that it was impossible to overtake the fire-bug who possessed such surprising fleetness.

Then it was they would have fired upon him, had they not seen there was a good prospect of his being captured, despite the vast advantage he possessed.

The rough, farmer-looking man, who had bounded like a bull-dog from the seat of the carriage and joined in the chase, developed at once an amazing capacity in the way of speed.

It was soon apparent that the contest lay between him and the fugitive.

The latter seemed to have tempted fate by this daring crime so early in the evening.

But Algot Langdon knew that the only man in the world whom he dreaded had departed from Ardville.

And having defied all others so long, he grew to regard them with contempt.

He felt that he could safely amuse himself again, without fear of being molested.

This time he deliberately set fire to the home of a poor man, who had refused to work on his farm at niggardly wages.

According to all human reasoning, nothing

could have prevented his escape but the unexpected appearance of the great Orson Oxx at the critical moment.

The latter comprehended his game, when he aimed for the same stretch of wood which had sheltered him before.

"If I know my own heart, and I think I do," muttered the Man of Iron, "there won't be any slipping out of the coat *this time*."

The other pursuers kept as close behind them as possible, and they ran with such speed that they were able to hold both the fugitive and the man immediately behind him in sight.

In a few minutes Orson Oxx saw that the game was his.

"Mr. Algol Langdon, known also as the Winking Demon, thou art my prisoner!" he exclaimed, reaching his mighty arm forward and seizing him, not by the slack of his coat, but by the neck, which was almost crushed by his steel like fingers.

It seemed as if the grasp almost encompassed the slim neck, as they might have spanned a lady's wrist, and the grip was one that could not be shaken off.

And yet, despite his frightful disadvantage, the wretch, still running, twisted himself half-way round, with an awful curse.

There was a blinding flash and report, but the Man of Iron expected the attempt, and the bullet went above his head.

"It is I—Orson Oxx! Surrender or I'll choke the life from your body."

But the miscreant struggled desperately.

"You needn't surrender if you don't want to," added Orson Oxx the next moment. "I can manage such truck as you with one hand."

"For God's sake, let me go!" pleaded The Demon, who suddenly realized that he was inextricably secured.

"I didn't catch you for the purpose of letting you go."

"I'll give you five—yes, ten thousand dollars."

"It's no use; that's not my style of business."

"I will give you twenty thousand; will pay it to you to-morrow at my house."

The Vigilantes were rapidly approaching and the miserable dog heard their cries. He knew what they meant.

"My God! they will lynch me," he gasped, his knees trembling under him; "let me go! let me go! I will make your fortune."

"It is useless to plead."

"Only let me slip away from you—just let me get into the wood, and I will take the risk!"

And he made another frenzied effort to break loose.

Orson Oxx had no wish to bandy words with him and he said nothing.

He simply held him as he would have held an unruly child from breaking away from him.

Of necessity what we have told must have taken place in a few seconds of time.

A few hurried sentences, a few fierce struggles to tear himself loose, and the other Vigilantes arrived on the scene.

When Algol Langdon comprehended that he was caught at last he collapsed utterly.

He went all to pieces.

He would have dropped like a dish-cloth to the ground, had not his captor held him on his feet.

The mysterious fire-bug was caught at last.

CHAPTER LV.

THE MOUNTAIN OAK BREASTING THE STORM.

"Kill him! Lynch him! We've got him dead to rights!"

They were precisely the same cries which greeted Orson Oxx on his arrival in Ardville a few nights before.

But this time they were applied to another individual.

They referred to the most prominent citizen of the village, for he lived so close that he was looked upon as belonging to the place itself.

There was a general expression of consternation when it became known that the prisoner was Algol Langdon.

But the fury of the people quickly burst forth.

"We knew it was he! we've been suspecting him all the time! Lynch him! Lynch him!"

These were the alarming cries which sounded on every hand.

The crowd rapidly increased in size.

Within five minutes fully a hundred men and boys were on the spot.

Among them was Brayton Russell, who crowded forward to where Orson Oxx was holding his prisoner.

"Great heavens! what does this mean?" he demanded, approaching close enough to make himself heard above the din. "Is that he?"

"He's the fire-bug who has been amusing himself for the past few months at the expense of Ardville."

"And doubtless fired my own home and was the cause of my mother's death."

"I have not a particle of doubt of it."

"Then they may lynch him for all I care!" retorted the young engineer, moving back.

"Brayton, it was you who saved my life when caught in just such a terrible scrape as this."

Of course, because you were innocent and he is guilty. There's a considerable distinction between the two cases."

"But it will be a disgrace to hang him."

"Isn't it the best use he can be put to?"

"No; it's the worst possible, and there is no necessity for disgracing your native place by this unlawful act."

"It makes his punishment sure."

"It will be just as sure if we surrender him to the authorities, for he was taken in the very act; he will be certain to be put in the penitentiary for many years; I don't know but what he will be hung, for arson, attended with the loss of life, is murder in this State."

"Oxx, it is mighty hard for me to refuse you anything, but—"

"I make a special request that you will stand by me in this attempt to save the scoundrel from the mob."

"I don't see why you should be so anxious—"

The impulsive fellow now wheeled about and shouted in stentorian tones which compelled silence:

"Fellow-citizens! there may be an excuse for lynch-law in a community where the law itself is paralyzed, but nowhere in the broad Empire State does such an excuse exist to-day."

"A few nights ago you clamored for the life of one whom you all pronounced guilty of firing your homes; had it not been for my appeal, you would have executed an innocent man."

"But there is no danger *this time*," shouted back one from the crowd, which continued to increase in numbers.

"No, there is not, nor is there any pretext for lynching him; we are not in Texas nor Colorado; we are where the arm of the law is all-powerful and where her majesty can be vindicated. Let me therefore deliver him over to the proper officers, let him be tried, and you may depend upon it he will be punished."

"Why not save the country the expense?"

There was a general laugh at this, and the clamor increased.

The multitude renewed their attempts to get hold of the prisoner and it was all Orson could do to prevent them.

Langdon himself was dazed and seemed oblivious of the terrible scene around him.

A more dismal picture of abject despair cannot be imagined.

"Fellow-citizens!" shouted Brayton Russell again in a voice which forced attention, "do you not think that the man who captured this wretch is entitled to some thanks?"

"Of course he is; he's a bully good fellow!"

"He's the man you tried to lynch the other night!"

It will be remembered that Orson Oxx was in disguise, while he was not on the eventful evening referred to.

The announcement created a sensation.

Some of the people could not credit it.

"It is the fact," repeated the young engineer, who, as we have shown, was popular with the people.

"Yes, I am the individual," said Oxx, removing his hat, while he also kept a firm grasp upon the prisoner.

All this might be so and the question could very well be asked what that had to do with the matter before the house.

Really nothing, but Orson Oxx and Brayton Russell saw that it served to divert the attention of the mob from the terrible matter which had aroused the most dreadful passions of their nature.

If the crowd could be reasoned with a few minutes, they might be persuaded to refrain from violence.

Among the people were several who must have heard the announcement of Brayton Russell with peculiar feelings.

Shadrach Yelland, Justice of the Peace, was there with his head bandaged.

So also was "Sam Six-Eye," who was never so disrespectfully handled in all his life, as on the "auspicious occasion," when he voted to land over the innocent prisoner to the mercies the mob.

They must have surveyed the towering form of the splendid athlete with curious emotion.

Under the light of the stars he was a man above the clamorous mob around him.

He was like a mountain oak breasting the storm.

CHAPTER LVI.

A PISTOL SHOT.

"My friends," called Brayton Russell, "I repeat the words I used the other night when my companion here was in peril."

"None of you has suffered more from the incendiary than have I."

"Did not my cherished mother perish in the flames?"

"Can there be a greater loss than that?"

"Did I believe there was a possibility of the escape of this wretch, I would be the first to throw the rope over the limb of the nearest tree."

"But no such danger exists; the law will see that he is punished as he deserves."

"And so will we, and there will be no mistake about it."

"Besides," added Russell, struck by a happy thought, "bear in mind we have caught but one of them; some of you believe there are others equally guilty; let us use this prisoner to run the others to earth."

This proposition staggered the most clamorous, and there was wavering for a moment or two.

Orson Oxx was quick to seize the advantage.

"*Make way for the prisoner!*"

He called out with the tones of a United States Marshal, and instantly began forcing his way through the mob.

There was an instinctive giving way for him, and he did not imperil it by any hesitation in manner.

But he was obliged to support almost the dead weight of Algol Langdon, who was a pitiable object, now that the hand of justice had seized him at last.

Never was there such excitement and consternation in Ardville, as on that starlight night in autumn, when Algol Langdon, the Winking Demon, was captured and discovered to be the fire-bug.

It was a truth which we may repeat, that there is good reason to believe, not a solitary soul suspected him, previous to the hour when he was taken by Orson Oxx while in the very act of incendiarism.

Although his lameness was perceptible when he walked, yet he had a skillful way of disguising it, and, as we have stated, it was scarcely noticeable when running.

His high stature and activity rendered it impossible for any one of the villagers to overtake him in anything like a fair chase.

There was but one man who could do so, and that man appeared on the spot at the right moment.

As was natural, perhaps, the immunity of the criminal rendered him reckless, and the probability is he would have been shot sooner or later while fleeing from the enraged citizens.

The resolution and promptness of Orson Oxx at a critical juncture, enabled him to force his way back to the village, with his prisoner unharmed.

When they reached there a difficulty confronted them.

The lock-up was of a primitive character, ill calculated to withstand the assault of an angry multitude.

The nearest jail of a substantial nature was a dozen miles away.

The question immediately arose whether he should be taken thither or whether he should be placed in the lock-up, under a strong guard.

"The mob seem to have quieted down a good deal," said Brayton Russell, who was consulting with Orson Oxx and several of the cooler-headed ones of the multitude.

"Do you think it will be safe to keep him here until to-morrow?" asked the detective of one of the citizens.

"Will he not be in as much danger from the

crowd if we attempt to take him to jail?" was the significant inquiry in return.

"How?"

"The majority of the people will swarm after us, and more than likely will seize him on the road."

"But we can place him in a carriage and drive so fast that we will leave the majority behind."

"I fear an outbreak the moment an attempt is made."

"Why not place him in the train?"

"There will be none here for more than an hour."

"There seems to be no other course then, than to shut him in the lock-up under a strong guard."

The citizen shrugged his shoulders and made no other reply.

He understood his neighbors better than did the detective, who however noted the suggestive gesture.

Orson Oxx found himself in anything but a pleasant predicament.

He was honestly anxious to protect the pitiful wretch from the vengeance of the crowd, but he saw no way in which it could be done with certainty.

The choice of evils appeared to be to trust the citizens, to a certain extent.

All this time, Algol Langdon had not spoken a word.

He was surrounded by the detective, the engineer and several other persons.

He was now placed in the single dilapidated room which, on rare occasions, was used as a lock-up.

There was no light within, and, when the simple padlock was turned upon him, it is impossible to conceive of a more miserable wretch than the late master of the Homestead.

The next important step was to secure a guard who would stand between him and the vengeance of the outraged community.

To the surprise of Orson Oxx, he had no trouble in obtaining a dozen men, who agreed to stand on the outside and assist in keeping the people from breaking into the building and wreaking vengeance on the culprit.

The detective did not feel altogether easy over the readiness manifested by these volunteers in the defense of law and order.

But there was no help for it.

"Brayton," said he, "I will stay here all night; things are not in a shape to suit me."

"I will stand by you; I can't help pitying the dog, for all he does not deserve it."

"You had better go and see Miss Langdon; she must have learned something, and it will be a dreadful shock to her."

"I will go, but will return in a few minutes."

The young engineer had scarcely reached the Ardville House, where his beloved was awaiting him, when he heard an ominous deepening of the tumult behind him.

He instantly turned about and ran back with all speed.

Quick as he was, he was yet too late.

There was great excitement about the door of the lock-up, but it did not mean what he suspected.

When Russell moved toward the hotel, those who stood immediately outside the structure heard the dull report of a pistol within.

Suspecting what it meant, Orson Oxx hastily broke open the door, and dashed in.

The form of Algol Langdon lay stretched on the floor in the darkness.

Seizing hold of it, the Man of Iron dragged it out into the dim starlight.

As he feared, the prisoner had shot himself. Orson Oxx had forgotten to take the weapon from him when he made him prisoner.

As soon as the criminal was alone and realized his position, he had seized the opportunity to end his existence.

A brief examination showed that his aim had been sure.

Algol Langdon, the Winking Demon, was beyond the vengeance of his outraged neighbors.

CHAPTER LVII.

CONCLUSION.

THE suicide of Algol Langdon, otherwise known as the Winking Demon, created a sensation in Ardville, which will not be forgotten for many a day.

Although we have no authority for expressing judgment on such a frightful occurrence, yet it seems well that it ended thus.

It was learned afterward that the men who

were so quick to volunteer to act as guard over the prisoner, did so on purpose to gain an opportunity to lynch him.

Their intention was to lull the suspicion of Orson Oxx, so as to induce him to withdraw, when they meant to break into the frail structure, and visit their wrath upon the criminal.

The universal respect in which the Man of Iron was held, and the obligations all felt for his capture of the villain, induced the mob to show that much consideration toward him.

Besides, it may not be amiss to state that the rioters had gained a pretty correct idea of the tremendous powers of the detective, when his wrath was aroused, and, though they were so numerous, yet every one shrunk from contact with his terrific fists, which had laid many a vaunter low.

The proceedings of that dreadful night were a shock to Ethel Langdon, from which she did not recover for a long time.

From her room in the hotel she heard the tumult and hoarse cries calling for vengeance, and it was not long before some thoughtless friend told her everything.

It was a relief to her when at last word came that the wicked man had ended his own career.

Investigation established the fact that Algol Langdon was the only person engaged in the incendiarism which had inflicted so much damage in Ardville, and which kept the village in such a state of consternation and terror.

Should any one ask why he committed these crimes, the answer would be found in the innate depravity of the wretch.

Those who knew him in life never make the query; they understand the reason.

He was a morbid, gnarly, vile creature, whose only enjoyment was in doing wrong, if it can be admitted that any one ever finds enjoyment in such a perversion of his nature.

Many of the incendiarisms on his part were unquestionably perpetrated with the intent of taking human life. In one case he succeeded, and, but for the exceptional vigilance of the villagers, he would have done so in other instances.

It was a cause of wonder to Orson Oxx that he could continue this so long without detection. Several times he was so defiant in what he did, that it looked as if he invited discovery on the part of his victims.

He used no disguise and frequent glimpses were caught of him, by the infuriated villagers, but his great fleetness enabled him to leave his pursuers very quickly out of sight.

It may have been that he lulled suspicion by directing it elsewhere, for several times, among his fellow citizens, he described a flying figure, of which he caught glimpses at night, and which answered in a general way to the common conception of the daring incendiary.

But, be that as it may, the pitcher went once too often to the fountain and so came to be broken at last.

Ethel Langdon made her home with a lady friend, for she declared she would never place foot in the Homestead again.

She was present at the funeral of the aged invalid Mrs. Moseman, and among all there was no more sincere mourner than she.

It was a source of wonder to Brayton Russell and his affianced, why the dead and gone Algol Langdon was so determined on preventing their marriage until after the bride-elect should reach her legal majority.

When the will of Mr. Langdon, the parent of Ethel was admitted to probate, it was found to contain no very peculiar provisions.

It made his surviving brother Algol the executor, and provided that on the marriage of Ethel, every dollar of personal and real estate should be turned over to her to be held by her in her own name.

There was nothing left to Algol, except the Homestead, which was worth considerable.

Investigation, however, proved that Algol had invested the entire fortune of his niece in silver mines in Colorado, whose prospectuses were of the usual overwhelming character.

It looked very much as if not a dollar would ever be seen again.

"And what care I if it is not?" said Brayton Russell, some weeks later, as he sat in the glowing firelight, with his beloved at his side.

"It will not be inconvenient to have," replied Ethel, with a smile, as she looked up in his face.

"No, perhaps not, but it is you whom I sought."

"I doubt it not, but will it lower me in your love, if I am not a poor, penniless girl?"

"*Nothing* can lower you in my estimation," he was quick to reply, pressing a kiss upon the damask cheek, "for you are placed on a throne, where you reign supreme."

"That is all the happiness I ask," was the response of the rare and radiant maiden.

They sat a few minutes in blissful communing, when Russell asked:

"Have you that ring ready?"

"Yes."

"Let me see it, please."

She rose and brought forth a casket from which she lifted a splendid diamond ring.

The *solitaire* was of first water and gleamed and glowed like a tiny star in the firelight.

Brayton Russell took the beautiful gem in his hand, held it up so that it could reflect the rays of light, and then slipped it on his own finger.

"It is very fine," he remarked, admiring it in all positions, "and it has cost considerable."

"How much?"

"I really cannot guess."

"Eight hundred dollars."

"No doubt it is worth it; and you purchased it entirely yourself?"

"Of course," she answered, with a smile; "do you suppose I would take up a collection for the purpose?"

"Probably not, but I expected the privilege of contributing something toward it."

"Why should you be permitted?"

"Am I not under greater obligations than you?"

"I cannot admit that Orson Oxx was equally devoted to us both. But there is no law to prevent you arranging some testimonial on your own account."

"I will remember the hint."

The diamond ring was a present from Ethel Langdon to Orson Oxx, the detective, and was accepted as a testimonial of the gratitude of our heroine to the magnificent fellow for his matchless services in behalf of herself and beloved.

Brayton Russell acted on the hint of his affianced and sent his friend an equally handsome acknowledgment of his gratitude.

The officials connected with Dr. Bristow Juliard's private lunatic asylum were not long in tracing the fugitives to Ardville, and they reached the village with the intention of arresting the whole party.

It was an easy matter, however, to convince them that the commitment of the young lady, in the first place, was an outrageous fraud, and that, if she were taken back, she would be speedily brought out on a writ of *habeas corpus*.

The investigation before the referee appointed by the court could not fail to reflect upon that institution which treated sane persons as insane.

Accordingly the officials went back with a flea in their ear, metaphorically speaking.

Brayton Russell made hunt for Doctors Bell and Thompson, who were the committing physicians in the case.

He did not state what he wished to see them for, but it must have been that the rogues suspected it.

At any rate, when they learned that the rather impetuous engineer was searching for them, they took very good care that he should not find them, at least not before they judged his wrath had abundant time to cool.

Orson Oxx told Jake Calkins that he deserved castigation for misleading them on the night of their flight, but he refrained from calling him to account, because the matter had ended in such an altogether unexpected and providential manner.

He finally agreed to compromise the dispute by making a visit to his friend in the Jersey Pines.

Consequently he made his appearance there not many months later and remained an entire week.

He never received a more royal welcome in all his life.

Jake Calkins was not wealthy, but he was hospitable, and he could not do too much for the friend, who had compelled his admiration.

Now and then he cautioned Oxx to remember and make no reference to his slight misunderstanding with Miss Hannah Hahlo, who was a little "off."

"There was nothing wrong about it you know," said the monumental prevaricator, as

he thoughtfully rubbed his chin, "but the old woman would be apt to make things rather warmer than is comfortable by a darned large majority."

It must be confessed that Orson Oxx was strongly tempted to drop a hint now and then that would have brought the recreant husband to book and precipitated an outbreak, but he concluded it was as well not to do so.

Consequently to this day, the good lady has no suspicion that her handsome husband was ever guilty of flirting with any of the gentler sex.

Orson considered the week passed among the fragrant pines as so much absolute rest.

He had been so actively occupied, that the cessation from care and anxiety was welcome to him.

By-and-by he began to feel restless.

Longings for his old, exciting, perilous life came back to him, and he felt that, if compelled to spend a month in the lonely pine barrens, he would die.

It was not long, therefore, before he was engaged, body and soul, in another dangerous enterprise, which required all the powers of his body and mind.

Perhaps we shall have something to tell our readers about it ere long.

The investments made by Algol Langdon with the property of his ward were of the wild-cat order and some of them resulted disastrously.

But others turned out unexpectedly well.

The Winking Demon dipped in so many different directions, that he could scarcely fail to gather in something.

A careful computation showed that the aggregate result was about the same, as though he had held the property undisturbed and then turned it over to the young lady, as commanded by the provisions of the will.

These investments were made in such a manner that no returns could be expected before Ethel reached the age of twenty-one.

In nearly every case such was the specification in the curious agreement made by the criminal with his partners.

Consequently on the marriage of his niece, before the time specified, the uncle would have been placed in a most disagreeable predicament had he been called on for an accounting, as he certainly would have been.

But Ethel always felt that he overestimated the consequences of such an obligation.

She could not believe that it was the dread he felt of facing such an accounting that led him to determine that the marriage should not take place for a couple of years.

It was his crooked, perverse, morbid nature that led him to wish to compass the death of the young man, who had never done him wrong, but who had already suffered awful injury at his hands.

It may be just, as well as charitable, to believe that had a commission on lunacy made an impartial investigation of the mental condition of the parties who have figured in this narrative, they would have pronounced Algol Langdon, the Winking Demon, that most dangerous of all individuals with which a suffering community can be afflicted, viz.—"a crank."

THE END.

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